Sponsorship of behavioural change

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Introduction

In the last year I have been asked for sponsor development programmes to enable organisations to build the capacity to meet the high volumes of strategic change that they are undertaking. These programmes include designing and delivering training courses and holding coaching sessions to enable managers to understand their responsibilities and more importantly identify the tasks and techniques for carrying them out.

When writing about Sponsors, I am not assuming that a Sponsor is necessarily a very senior manager. Many organisations are realising that in order to cope with the high volumes of change that they want to achieve, they need to distribute leadership of these initiatives further down their organisational hierarchy. Many of the Sponsors I have coached in the last 12 months are experienced "middle management" who lead departments and functions but do not have executive responsibility.

This paper summarises the information that the Sponsors I have worked with have found most useful and shares their experiences of being an effective sponsor.

Project delivery and behavioural change are not the same thing

Understanding the scope of effective sponsorship is the most important conversation. Sponsorship involves ensuring delivery of the tangible changes through effective project management coupled with active support for readying the business environment so that the project deliverables are adopted and become an integral part of the new 'business as usual'.

However, a lot of material aimed at Sponsors comes from the world of project management, so the guidance concentrates on tracking the delivery, not the implementation. I help to establish the difference between these two responsibilities by asking Sponsors what it is that they really need to achieve. In every conversation, the conclusion is the same – they need the business to work differently. They need staff to take on new tasks, to use different processes, to work with different people and to offer new services to customers.

Exploring this enables us to identify that Sponsorship involves encouraging everyone to adapt what they do and how they do it. So Sponsoring change is a very active role, encouraging staff to get involved, engaging in conversations to change how people see their role, to co-create with colleagues new ways of working, new priorities and new values.

Helping to achieve behavioural change

There are lots of things that Sponsors can choose to concentrate on, but from my work with those that are really talented, I can see that they all work actively to:
- Champion the change
- Set the right culture
- Solve problems

Championing the change

Championing means advocating for the change. Effective advocacy comprises several elements:
- Compelling vision of the change
- Identification of relevant and believable benefits that will result from the change
- A clear description of how this change aligns to all the other changes that are taking place

However, too often, Sponsors expect the Project Team to provide the Business Case for the change, and to take day to day responsibility for explaining the benefits of the change. This is an abdication of duty, muddying the waters between managing the initiative and sponsoring it. Whenever I work with project and change teams to talk about the responsibilities of the Sponsor, there is general disbelief, because the championing that I am describing does not happen in reality.

During my Sponsor training, I tackle this problem head on. I give lots of academic reasons as well as practical reasons why it is so important for Sponsors to visibly, vocally and frequently demonstrate their belief in the value of the change.

Professor John Kotter in his many books about effective change management talks of the need to create a sense of urgency for the change. Dan Pink in his explanation of intrinsic motivation makes the point that if those expected to change cannot believe in the purpose of the change, then they will have no personal motivation for making the change happen.

We all know that there is no motivation to implement changes that are vanity projects by executives of the company or changes that appear to be happening because we haven't changed things in a while! Professor Edgar Schein stated that to generate the push to make change happen, individuals need to feel a sense of survival anxiety, believing that staying where they are is more dangerous than stepping into the unknown of change.

The most effective voice in creating this sense of urgency is the Sponsor, as they are able to articulate not only the benefits and importance of the change, but also to explain how this one change contributes to the wider strategic goals of the organisation, which a more junior member of staff finds harder to see as they don't have exposure to the strategic discussions that senior Sponsors have.

Set the right culture

Culture is always difficult to describe, but some of the best models identify the tacit beliefs and assumptions that people have about their organisation, coupled with the systems and processes that they explicitly use to carry out these assumptions.

If organisations are to meet their ambitions to implement high volume of change then Sponsors have to create an environment where continuous change is viewed as normal. To do this, I workshop with Sponsors what the current prevailing beliefs are, because if we don't surface these, it is going to be

very difficult to change them. The following are examples of the assumptions that get in the way of change and new ideas that need to replace them:

> It is important to stick to what we know *replaced by* if we stand still our customers and our competitors will move past us.
>
> Each change is a one off and when it is completed we will return to 'normal' *replaced by* change is continuous and the 'norm' continually evolves.
>
> Change comes from top down *replaced by* anyone can have a good idea and everyone is responsible for identifying improvements and additions to how work is carried out.
>
> It is important not to fail *replaced by* it is essential to experiment, recognising that experiments do not always work first time and that is OK, we will learn and improve from them.

These are just examples, but they illustrate that Sponsors have a responsibility to create the environment that enables change to happen, not just push for progress on a specific change initiative.
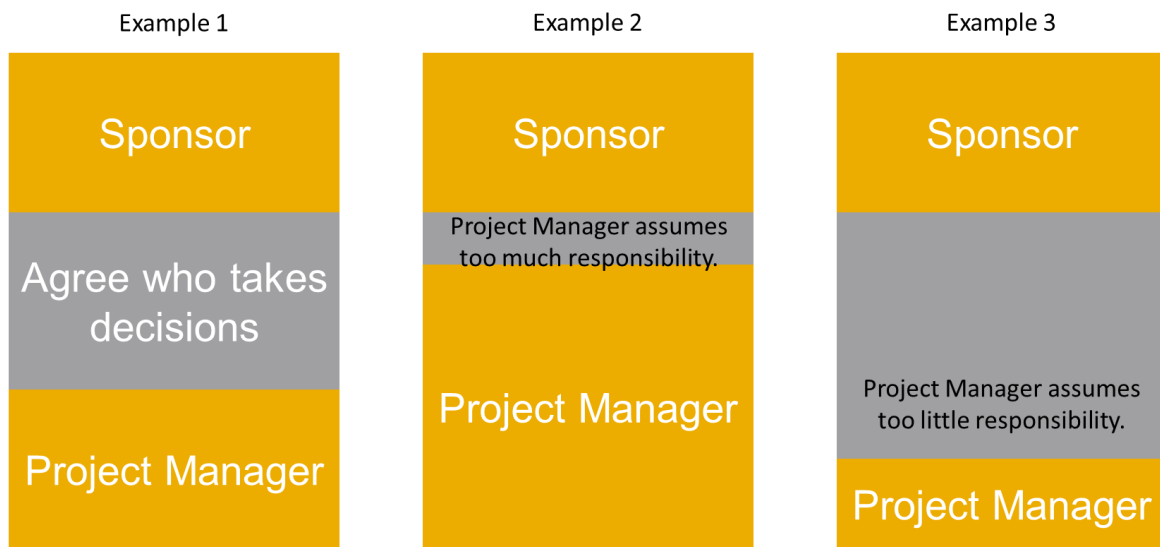
Solve problems

I think there are two level of problems that the Sponsor needs to be involved in. One group of problems is experienced by the team who are responsible for managing the change. The other problems are from those impacted by the change, who are struggling to balance their involvement with the change and their responsibilities for 'business as usual'.

Team problems

We might be working in a world of empowered teams but there are some problems that only the political power of the Sponsor can solve and there are some problems that for political reasons the Sponsor doesn't want the team to deal with but wants to deal with them personally.

One of the biggest realisations by Sponsors in my training is that they need to be explicit about what they want the team to manage and what they want them to escalate. I draw the following diagram to explain how important it is to not to leave a grey area, but to work collaboratively with the team to clarify the balance of responsibilities and power between the team and the Sponsor.

Example 1   Example 2   Example 3

Sponsor	Sponsor	Sponsor
Agree who takes decisions	Project Manager assumes too much responsibility.	Project Manager assumes too little responsibility.
Project Manager	Project Manager	Project Manager

In diagram 1, the Sponsor and the Project Manager/Project Team discuss likely challenges that will arise and identify areas of responsibility. In diagram 2 this conversation has not taken place so the Project Manager/ Project Team take a lot of decisions for themselves. Positively this can be interpreted as being 'self-directed' but many Sponsors will be unhappy as they feel the team have overstepped their natural boundary of authority.

In diagram 3, again, there has been agreement with the Sponsor and in this case the Project Manager/Project Team are perceived by the Sponsor as taking too little initiative and asking for guidance about too many issues.

Problems in resourcing change
To make the change happen in practice, the details of the change need to be worked out by everyone who is affected. They need to discuss, share ideas, question their understanding, try out new approaches, assess the impact and try different things.

This all requires time away from 'business as usual' so the Sponsor needs to be active in helping to balance these competing priorities. This requires difficult decisions and in my opinion is the aspect of sponsorship most likely to fail. If this problem is not addressed, then staff pay the price, as they try to participate in change whilst under pressure to meet KPIs for existing business. The pressure builds up, and either people take sick leave, or they start to look for other jobs.

Tracking the progress of behavioural change

So many Programme Boards track the progress of the project delivery and do not ask questions about whether those expected to use them are likely to do so. However, if we start with the following two assumptions, then we can reconfigure how Programme Boards work and get real value from these meetings:

Assumption 1 - If staff are involved in creating new ways of working that make use of the project deliverables, then there is a very good chance that the benefits in cost efficiency and the increase in revenue promised in the Business Case will be achieved.

Assumption 2 – The questions that Sponsors ask have a real impact on what people decide to concentrate on, because knowing that your Sponsor has interest in something increases its perceived importance and therefore priority.

To keep things simple, I take my Sponsors through four stages of behavioural change, so that they can devise the questions they want to ask at each stage.

Awareness
Perception
Participation
Adoption

Stage 1 – Awareness

At the start of any change initiative, it is important that those who are impacted:
- Realise that they are impacted and that this is not something they can ignore
- Understand, at least at a high level, what aspects of their role will need to change

To achieve this awareness, the team responsible for the change and the Sponsor will need to communicate a lot, often repeating simple messages about the change. This is the start of the championing role for the Sponsor described earlier in this paper.

To assess if this first stage is underway, the Sponsor needs to decide if there is any 'buzz' about the change. Are people asking the Sponsor questions about the intended impact, the expected benefits, the scope or timing of the change? How many people are asking these questions? Is there involvement from across the community that is affected or just pockets of interest?

Awareness must generate enough energy to take the change into the next stage. If there is an air of passivity, if the Sponsor gets the sense that those impacted think the change can safely be ignored, or have decided it is not important right now, then more needs to be done.

Stage 2 – Perception

Positive perception of the change is needed if people are to become involved in making it a reality. Everyone has to find their own motivation for making the change a success, and this will not happen if

they do not agree with the change. If they think it is harmful, that it doesn't lead to an improvement in their current situation then they will sit on the sidelines (at best) or actively campaign against it (at worst).

Again, the Sponsor has to become sufficiently close to the situation to assess the level of support for the change and take responsibility for creating interest and excitement where none exists. To begin with Sponsors should expect the level of genuine acceptance to be low. Initial reaction to change is often negative as those affected calculate the cost to themselves of losing their comfortable routines. Even if current ways of working are unpopular, when threatened with change they become far more attractive compared to the effort needed to learn something different.

Sponsors can only shift perception if they engage in dialogue. One of the most important factors in changing perception is to listen, and to let the other person know that their concerns and objections have been heard. Once expressed, especially to someone senior, individuals are free to think past their initial reaction, which is often less negative.

Sponsors should assess if they think there is enough debate. Silence is not an indicator of support, instead it hides dis-engagement, where individuals hope that by staying quiet the change will melt away. If people are not expressing their opinions freely, then Sponsors need to ask for them, and to spend time explaining why they view the change as relevant and beneficial and essential at this point in time.

Stage 3 – Participation

When people support the change, they will be willing to get involved in creating it. The stage of participation is crucial, because until there is sufficient goodwill for the change, there will be too few people trying to make it a reality. There can never be a guaranteed level of sufficient participation, but experience tells us there has to be a significant majority in favour of making things happen before the change becomes an unstoppable force. Professor John Kotter suggested at least 75% of managers need to be on-board with new ways of working, and whilst I have never counted the exact number I know that the more people who are looking towards a new destination, the easier it is to set a new course towards it.

Sponsors at this point need to ask questions about what people are finding out about the new ways of working, and really engage with the answers. Any scope that is immovable at this point means that there is no opportunity for those participating to shape the change. This means there is no motivation to pursue ideas and the change falls flat as people withdraw their goodwill. Effective sponsors continue to articulate the goals of the change but are willing to let those who are most directly affected establish all of the details so that the change is workable and practical.

Stage 4 – Adoption

This is the point at which the change is morphing into established practice. Sponsors need to alter their questions so that their attention is turned towards results rather than the level of involvement. These questions encourage people to realise how far they have moved from their old ways of working and to identify how the new approach is a better fit for customers.

In this environment of continuous change it is also important for Sponsors to ask for more suggestions of change, to generate an atmosphere where everyone is looking for the next improvement and the next big idea. By asking 'what else can we improve?' the Sponsor keeps alive the culture of involvement and participation that has achieved this change.

About the author

I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I have an impressive track record of successful consulting assignments and I am an acknowledged thought leader in Change Management.

I am the Co-Chair of the Change Management Institute UK and a respected author of text books and articles on change, project and programme management. I am a talented communicator with a reputation for delivering complex information with humour and passion. I draw on my wealth of practical experience to illustrate concepts and to engage my audience in lively debates on advantages and disadvantages of each approach that I outline.

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