



CHOOSING THE RIGHT EXECUTIVE SPONSOR

Research shows that an active and engaged executive sponsor is consistently a key driver of project success. Yet, the Project Management Institute found in 2018 that 38% of projects do not have active executive sponsorship. Below are things to consider when looking for a new executive sponsor as well as some factors to rate your existing executive sponsor against.

Things to Consider when Choosing a New Sponsor

If you are looking for the right executive for the job, you want to look for people with high proficiency in the following skills:

- Open to feedback/ input – This is a collaborative and coalition building position. A position that will require the ability to listen to sometimes passionate feedback. It may be feedback about their own performance when the change team needs something they aren't getting. It may be feedback about the change itself when communicating with other executives or the workforce. The executive needs to be able to listen, synthesize, and share the feedback with the change team.
- Ability to influence – A key part of the executive sponsor role is to build a coalition of support among senior leadership and communicate in a way that engenders trust amongst the workforce as a whole.
- Strong leadership skills – Someone who relies solely on position, title, or fear to lead will not do well in this role because they will have to lead and influence without the benefit of position power in most cases. Additionally, they need to be able to lead and guide the change team without trying to manage the day-to-day operations. The individual needs to understand the difference between true leadership and management.
- Negotiation skills – There will be times where the executive sponsor might need to fight for resources (human or financial) in order for the change to be successful. They may also need to provide guidance to the change team in terms of timing of initiatives based on larger considerations. The ability to negotiate, instead of order or intimidate, is going to be a key skill.

- Commands respect – The more the workforce trusts and respects the leader before the change, the better it is for change overall. Organizational change can be a time full of ambiguity and turmoil. If the workforce inherently trusts and respects the executive sponsor, the messages coming from that executive will do much more to relieve the tensions always present during a change initiative.

- Ability to harness the capabilities of stakeholders across organization – This is an often under appreciated skill but can be invaluable during an organizational change. Being able to understand the needs of the change team and reach into a large organizational network to identify the resource to meet that need and connect the change team and the resource quickly can make or break a change.

- Knowledge of the organization – Given the need to be known and respected, a knowledge of the whole organization is an important skill for the right executive sponsor. Whether they “grew up” in the organization or not, having an in depth of all parts of the organization (and a network to match) is key to being successful in the role.

- Knowledge of the change – Both knowledge of the change and passion for the change are important things the executive sponsor should possess. An executive sponsor who advocates for a change because they are held accountable on their performance plan is a different level of advocacy than an executive sponsor who truly believes the change is what's best for the organization moving forward. While adding the performance metric in their individual plan is a great idea, they should be passionate and knowledgeable about the change regardless.



RATE YOUR EXISTING EXECUTIVE SPONSOR

Below are several pairs of characteristics. Rate your existing executive sponsor on a continuum from left to right. The pairs have been set up so those characteristics more likely to lead to success are on the right-hand side. Once you have completed the assessment, set up time with your executive sponsor and have a discussion with them, asking them for more support in the areas that need it and thanking them for the support they are providing. Remember that being an executive sponsor is an “other duty as assigned” and your sponsor may or may not have clarity on what that means. This isn’t about beating up on your sponsor, but about giving them clarity on what you need and how they can better support the change effort.

Option 1	1 >	Continuum	<10	Option 2
Change is seen as transactional or disconnected from overall business strategy				Uses position to ensure the goals of the change initiative are in alignment with overall business strategy
Relies on actions of the change team to gather support for the change				Proactively uses their influence to gather support for the change
Communication about the change is ad hoc and sporadic				Communication about the change is strategic, on message, and concise
Does not engage with leadership peers to address resistance				Engages with leadership peers to overcome resistance
Does not provide strategic insights based on enterprise-wide context				Provides continuous strategic direction, sharing enterprise-wide context as needed
Does not leverage networks to make connections for the change team				Uses networks to make connections between the change team and key stakeholder representatives

Passively assists in removing obstacles if asked		Proactively removes obstacles for the change team, creating conditions for success
Does not work to keep the change effort visible among senior leadership		Works to keep the change effort visible among senior leadership
Has only a general understanding of the change need		Has detailed knowledge of why the change is needed, the process being taken, and the desired outcomes the change will provide
Makes decisions slowly or defers decisions to others		Takes responsibility for making decisions and makes them quickly to maintain momentum
Does not try to influence peers unless to remove outright resistance		Uses influence to create a coalition of active support amongst peers
Does not provide or advocate for needed resources for the change team		Proactively provides or advocates for needed resources for the change team
Provides input at the operational level, micromanaging the change team (or provides no input at all)		Offers input to the change team from a strategic level that provides important context for change success