



The Strategy of the Executive Sponsor: Six Images

Zachary Tumin
Harvard University¹

What is executive sponsorship? It's what we do when we want to lead our organizations – and often *others* over whom we have no direct control – in specific initiatives to improve our world in some way that we deem vital. It's a science and an art that combines vision with leadership, organization, technique, and passion. What makes it hard? We're all interested in collaborations to leverage other organizations – their resources, authorities and competencies. More often we require those partnerships – whether for a day, a year or always, for our own success. But we also all know that leading initiatives that cross boundaries raises new challenges about *how*: It's as much about people, politics and good management as it is about technology.

As we consider the role of the executive sponsor in cross-boundary change and transformation, we have available to us several case studies where different images of executive sponsorship are apparent. By “image” we mean a view of the position which seems to characterize some essential attribute of it, one which a sponsor feels responsible for, which reflects the kinds of action he or she is authorized and resourced to take, and around which he or she can marshal political support to make needed gains.

As we shall see through our cases and elsewhere, at least six distinct images of executive sponsors, each viewed as a strategy, seem identifiable. Among them, two seem to represent efforts to truly transform enterprises.

By noticing different images of the executive sponsor, we can understand their dimensions, appreciate their unique and shared challenges, and hone in on factors that affect success or failure. With those in mind, we can codify our knowledge, begin to train for success, and pass our knowledge on to the next generation of leaders.

What follows, then, are several images of executive sponsors each comprising a different strategy. They are not tidy in the sense that they completely and uniquely describe one and only one strategy. But each image seems to suggest a fundamentally different approach that is worthy of distinguishing.

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1. The Executive Sponsor as *Pure Compliance Champion*

One quite common image of the executive sponsor is of the individual who sponsors initiatives to bring his or her organization into better alignment with its authorizing charge, or into compliance with its statutory or regulatory requirements. The executive sponsor as *pure compliance champion* may notice that the organization has fallen out of alignment or compliance, or risks doing so in the future. It may be that new requirements will create new burdens for the organization that it may be unprepared to meet. Or, changes in the organization's current resource mix expose it to gaps in compliance for existing requirements.

Either way, the pure compliance champion acts on the belief that the organization mission is sound; that compliance with it is a virtue and creates the best possible value; but that the organization has drifted or might soon. This executive sponsor initiates measures to preserve or restore the organization's execution of its core mission as defined by statute, regulation or other charter. One metric of success is alignment and allocation of resources to produce the outputs as required by its authorizing legislation.

We might think of this as the champion of a pure claims processing system for Medicaid. There is a strong focus on outputs, minimizing total cost of service, and achieving consistency in the treatment of like cases alike across millions of claims.

2. The Executive Sponsor as *Transaction or System Optimizer*

The executive sponsor as *transaction or system optimizer* notices that his or her organization is meeting its authorizing requirements, but performance (value) with existing inputs can improve. Alternatively, the system optimizer may face a future of fewer or different inputs, and will need to assure that performance holds to current levels.

This sponsor seeks to optimize measurable performance of a system by rationalizing, standardizing core business services across multiple business units. ROI may be measured by lower cost, better service. Consolidation of back office operations is a classic field of play for the transaction or system optimizer, introducing enterprise wide e-mail, or consolidated HR or payroll systems.

3. The Executive Sponsor as *Problem Solver*

This executive sponsor notices some repeat, costly, and patterned instances of organization failure. In particular, he or she notices that the organization may be producing what it is nominally supposed to produce (think of a police department producing arrests) but is not achieving the intended *outcomes* (think of safety on a street corner). Thus, this is the first model where the executive sponsor notices that the organization is doing what it is supposed to be doing, but the outcome is falling short, and something may be awry in the production process itself (think, a failure of prosecutors to charge street leave narcotics crimes appropriately).

This executive sponsor wants to attack some specific knot somewhere to relieve pressure, improve performance, or further outcomes, and sponsors collaborative efforts to solve this problem and move on. These might be problems that surface innocently by overtaxing a system or starving it of a critical input needed for production. The fix can be quite complex – as it may require multiple organizations to collaborate. But on this model, the goal and ROI is measured as problem dissipation sufficient to permit the organization to go about its business and execute on its core mission so that the outputs do in fact yield the intended outcomes.

Mike Krieger in our MDA case comes to mind here, seeing the problem of cross-domain information sharing, and seeking to dissipate it by his intervention. But the example is imperfect – Mike seeks more than problem dissipation. He seeks to establish a new capability.

4. The Executive Sponsor as *Community Capability Builder*

Like the problem solver, the executive sponsor as *community capability builder* notices a repeat failure to deliver on intended outcomes. However, this sponsor seeks more than problem dissipation or system optimization. Even with quality improvement, *and* systems optimized, *and* problems/knots dissipated, the sponsor notices that there is much value left on the table. His assets or someone else's are underachieving. He or she looks to leverage via alliances, information sharing, and other means, to make durable new arrangements that utilize community resources in new value-producing ways.

Examples of this may include a new information sharing “platform,” as Mike Krieger brought forward for DoD and DHS in the MDA case. Or, it might be the JRIC collaboration sponsored by Bill Bratton in Los Angeles which pooled intelligence data so that analysts could see patterns that were otherwise out of view. It might be Rick Friedman in the MITA case who seeks new rules for state Medicaid acquisitions to require system interoperability and induce the free flow of information.

The executive sponsor as community capability builder is engaged in efforts to vastly improve overall community performance by introducing a new capability (e.g., a process, tool, or platform) that can *transform* the inputs to produce vastly improved overall community performance – value that is substantially “over plan” taken singly or together. ROI can now be measured by expected and significant changes in outcomes for health, safety, or education, for example.

5. The Executive Sponsor as *Institution Builder*

Like the problem solver, the executive sponsor as *institution builder* notices repeat and costly instances of failure that cannot be addressed by QI or systems optimization. Like the capability-builder, he or she wants an enduring fix.

However, the executive sponsor as institution builder notices an overall and systemic failure, organization-wide, to achieve original societal goals (i.e., health, justice, or effective warfighting). He or she sees extraordinary resources and authorities invested in his organization that are vastly underperforming, and which will require a fundamental new strategy if they are to realize the goals that society intended by its original investments. Or, it may be that the current environment has changed so dramatically in recent years that organization design no longer mixes the inputs in ways that yield the social value required. ROI is low and trending precipitously downward.

Examples here include Bill Johnson and Jim Shannon in the US Navy open architecture effort – involving a complete re-script of the strategy of combat systems design, acquisition, and procurement and contractor management in order to support transformed warfighting capability via net-centric models. We may think, also, of “Arthur Smith” in the case “Word is Love”, who looked to the highest value outcome possible to be achieved for children working with his social workers – a loving home – and worked backwards to re-script the IT infrastructure to support that. We might think of all the state Medicaid directors among the “early adopters” in the MITA case as eager to transform their data, seeking ways to leverage the data to support health for individuals and communities at a level neither planned for, contemplated, or perhaps even required earlier.

For this sponsor, the great effort is realignment of work to desired outcomes – and a re-scripting of the infrastructure, business process, authorizations, and human factors all necessary to realign on a new outcome-focused mission. ROI is measured in return to valued outcomes for (e.g., justice, safety, health).

Those are five images of the executive sponsor that emerge in our cases. As I mentioned, the boundaries are not neat. There is a sixth image which is not so much a strategy as a tool or technique, and it is worth mentioning as well.

6. The Executive Sponsor as *Strategic Investor*. This sponsor notices a gap in capability that he or she requires for success. This sponsor invests some asset that he or she controls – perhaps loans it, or donates it. It could be an authority, or a resource, or a skill – something that’s needed to fill a void and create some new capability using his or her start-up capital. Mike Krieger's mission to stand up communities of interests (of all sorts) in the MDA case is an example. While Krieger is obviously concerned with outcomes, (e.g., “improved maritime domain awareness”) his mission is to disperse the innovation and enhance domain-wide capability for improved information sharing. He invests his time and resources to create the capability, and moves on.