Characteristics of Effective Sponsorship

connerpartners

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Much has been written over the last several decades on the qualities of effective leadership. However, one aspect of leadership that has received relatively little attention is the characteristics required when a leader is pursuing a major new strategy or change initiative within their own organization. Effectively playing this role, which we called change sponsorship*, is arguably the most important factor that determines whether a strategy or initiative fully achieves its intended outcome.*

Given recent disruptions in the external environment, leaders around the globe increasingly find themselves involved in making significant shifts to address risks and leverage opportunities confronting their organizations. In this paper, we explore the specific leadership mindsets and behaviors that are essential if a sponsor is to have a decent chance of succeeding in their pursuit of major organizational change. We further discuss how sponsors must deploy these qualities as they execute their most urgent strategic changes.

Leaders are often frustrated by their inability to achieve the anticipated benefits of their change decisions even under the most favorable conditions. "I'm pushing all the right buttons," they say, "but I can't seem to get the lights to go on." When this occurs, the objectives of their change initiatives fail to be *realized*. At best, they succeed in *installing* components of their change efforts.

- **Installation** means putting a fix in place (e.g., new organizational structures, digital transformation, or innovation investment efforts). All change efforts go through this phase, which involves inserting cognitive and/or physical solutions into the work environment. An organization has *installed* an initiative when it has approved, announced, launched, and educated its people on the deployment of the change.

- **Realization** occurs when the fundamental purpose of a change is achieved. Here, installed solutions have their desired impact, and sought-after outcomes are demonstrated over a sustained period of time. Realization is about accomplishing what was originally promised when resources were allocated to execute the change.

Realizing the intended outcomes of major organizational change requires many factors to converge in just the right way. However, none is more important than leaders fulfilling their role as sponsors during the implementation process.

Sponsors are individuals or groups who have the power to authorize or legitimize change in their area of responsibility. They sanction initiatives through the use of influential communication and meaningful consequences (rewards and punishments). Successful leaders fill this role while overseeing three other categories of change roles: *advocates*, who want change but lack the power to authorize it; *agents*, who develop and help carry out change implementation plans; and *targets,* who are ultimately impacted by and must accommodate the change.

Effective sponsorship is vital to the success of a change effort. With effective sponsorship, the initiative has a much greater likelihood of achieving full realization. Without it, there can be dire consequences.

As the current environment continues to present wave upon wave of challenges, leaders are being called on as never before to implement urgently needed changes in order to maintain their competitive edge and remain relevant; make their desired impact; and, in some cases, survive as a viable entity. Successful sponsors are those who achieve the full human and operational objectives of their change decisions. Unsuccessful sponsors are those who cannot fully execute their decisions or who do so only after investing a great deal more resources than planned.

For unsuccessful sponsors, the outcomes are costly:

- Failure to solve the presenting problems or exploit the opportunities

- Wasted time, money, and human resources

- Lessened impact on the markets they serve

Leaders who are unable to fully implement needed changes face two other important consequences:

- People within the organization learn to ignore leadership directives.

- Leaders appear to lack control, and the organization (and often its board) loses confidence in its leadership.

In other words, when change efforts fall short of realizing their intent, both the organization and its leaders can experience devastating repercussions.

This document is intended as a "sponsorship primer"—a high-level overview of some of the pivotal issues and challenges faced by executives responsible for accomplishing critically important change endeavors. In the next two sections, we'll explore these concerns through the lens of two main categories of characteristics that differentiate strong sponsorship from weak: *mindsets* and *behaviors*. Collectively, these characteristics reveal the insights and actions that successful sponsors rely on to interpret and manage the dynamics in play when orchestrating strategic change. We will then turn our attention to how successful leaders effectively deploy their sponsorship throughout their organizations as they pursue their urgent change priorities.

SPONSOR MINDSETS

Mindsets are comprised of (1) the frame of reference someone uses to make sense of whatever is transpiring around him/her and (2) the priorities formed within that context. To understand someone's mindset is to grasp how they see the world and what is important to them.

Sponsors who succeed with major change tend to display certain shared mindsets. These are the perspectives and values they rely on to interpret and manage the dynamics that unfold during key transitions. As described below, these mindsets reflect lessons learned by leaders who have confronted the tough realities of what it takes to successfully execute and realize transformational endeavors.

1. Paradigm shifts[1] are not reached by consensus.

The governance of successful major change has a distinctive pattern: It is characterized by strong, decisive leaders who seek out, value, and are influenced by various viewpoints. What actually changes, who is affected, and how fast the shifts occur are all aspects of the transition process that warrant input from constituencies being affected. Nevertheless, within most organizations, true transformative change is not the result of negotiation or consensus. The ultimate decisions are the responsibility of the change sponsors.

This may seem to contradict the cultures of those organizations that pride themselves on their commitment to consensus or collaborative decision-making. While striving for collective support before making a decision is often a useful first step, it can become counterproductive when significant and urgent shifts in the prevailing paradigm(s) are warranted.

Fundamental change demands that leaders maintain an unequivocal center of gravity to counter the tendency of bureaucracies to inhibit full realization of intended outcomes or to revert to the status quo once some initial progress is made. Yet, while this kind of strong leadership is imperative, sponsors who do not also encourage open expression of diverse opinions, deeply respect the views that are shared, and incorporate as many of these perspectives as possible into their deliberations usually fail to reach and sustain realization.

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[1] In the context of this paper, the term "paradigm" is used to reflect the perceptions shared by people concerning what their organization's purpose is and how it is to be achieved (i.e., what the key goals are and how work toward those goals will be accomplished).

When this mindset is in play…	If it is not being demonstrated…
Sponsors clearly establish expectations so people understand that their input will be valued during change-related deliberations but that the final decisions will be made by the sponsors.	Sponsors provide confusing or ambiguous guidance about how decisions will be made; they attempt to resolve critical issues through consensus or overemphasize socialization of proposed solutions; and/or they revert to authoritarian rule, ignoring any counsel from those being affected.

2. Change is messy.

If transformational initiatives involved strictly clear-cut options and left-brain thinking, change execution would be much more linear and easier to execute. The future would be an extension of the past, and there would either be a logical case for the change, or not. There would always be some disagreement over whose logic should prevail, but ultimately it would boil down to cognitively weighing the facts. Everyone would eventually defer to the soundness of the reasoning revealed by the available data.

Transformational change, unfortunately, is nowhere near this straightforward. It's actually a very messy process. Redirection of this nature is discontinuous, meaning reliance on what worked in the past is an untenable proposition. Rational decision-making is by no means abandoned, but it must be paired with a high tolerance for ambiguity—e.g., the ability to manage paradoxes, make tough decisions with insufficient data, and recover from numerous failed attempts.

Then, to make this process even more challenging, all of the uncertainty can trigger a range of highly charged feelings that require a well-developed sense of emotional grounding to properly address.

When this mindset is in play…	If it is not being demonstrated…
Sponsors are ambidextrous in their responses to change. They demonstrate a predisposition for the creative, emotional, and analytical demands they face. Consequently, they have tolerance for complications and complexity, confidence in their decision-making instincts, and the tenacity to carry on when they initially fall short of objectives.	Sponsors are prone to relying solely on their analytical skills to solve problems and are typically underprepared for the messiness of change. As a result, they often fail to reach realization, and when this happens, they tend to blame others. They become frustrated that someone didn't "get it," as if the problems were math equations with purely logical solutions that the person failed to solve.

3. Crucial imperative change must be prioritized over good ideas.

Major change creates demands on the physical, mental, and emotional energy (capacity) of an organization as its staff rechannel their behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions to accommodate new ways of operating. When the combined demands of a new change initiative plus existing work are greater than people's ability to meet them, prioritization becomes a necessity. If sponsors are not attentive to this potential to exceed the capacity of their organization, the potential for dysfunction increases (e.g., intended outcomes are installed rather than realized, productivity is reduced, quality is diminished). Under these circumstances, sponsors must either:

- Protect *existing* change projects by rejecting or modifying new endeavors that could compete for resources/capacity, or

- Protect one or more *new* initiatives by terminating or modifying existing change endeavors that could compete for resources/capacity.

These can be extremely difficult choices requiring the ability to differentiate between "good ideas" (changes that are justified and desirable) and "crucial imperatives" (changes that are essential and nonnegotiable). Despite the tendency of many leaders to pursue any change that creates some degree of value, during periods of overload, successful sponsors place a priority on pursuing crucial imperatives.

When this mindset is in play…	If it is not being demonstrated…
Sponsors rank order the current efforts or initiatives and pursue the "crucial imperatives" (versus the "good ideas"). Examples of ways to address attractive projects that could jeopardize essential change include: • Terminate or do not approve • Rescope so that they have less impact • Install instead of fully realizing • Delay implementation until more organizational capacity is available	Sponsors either: • Don't evaluate the organization's demand/capacity ratio; • Assess the ratio but don't allow evidence of demand overload to prevent them from engaging more change than people can absorb; or • Assess the ratio but overestimate adaptation capacity because their organizations have, on occasion, demonstrated the capacity go "above and beyond" during previous short-term surges of change (e.g., a merger or acquisition, regulatory-driven change, or externally generated crisis).

4. There is always risk in realizing transformational change.

The nature of major transitions includes inevitable surprises, challenges, and unmet expectations, as well as errors and mistakes. However, many leaders try to hide from or put a "spin" on anything that deviates from the planned path. They teach those around them that when the "red, yellow, green"

status reports are submitted, they expect little (if any) red and minimal yellow. Such an approach tends to block or delay important issues from surfacing, which can cause even bigger problems down the line.

Successful sponsors, on the other hand, help promote a "red is good" attitude toward status reporting—they encourage people to honestly portray the true condition of projects and express their actual concerns. Once this view is accepted as a cultural norm, the objective for status meetings moves from keeping a project's appearance flawless to conveying risk as quickly and completely as possible. This, in turn, provides the greatest likelihood of identifying and engaging timely mitigation.

When this mindset is in play…	If it is not being demonstrated…
Sponsors don't "shoot the messenger" when they learn of risks; they choose instead to focus on resolution. People learn that they are valued for bringing risks forward rather than buffering leaders from problems. As a result, everyone involved is more confident that a true assessment of current conditions will prevail.	People see that sponsors become very uncomfortable when risks surface, so they view their role as protecting sponsors from having to deal with problems. In turn, sponsors view those who identify implementation problems as troublemakers who unnecessarily escalate challenges that they should have handled themselves.

5. Discomfort is inherent in change success.

Uneasiness and distress are unavoidable parts of true transformation. People cannot help but feel uncomfortable confronting tough decisions, difficult choices, and the true cost of securing the changes they have engaged. Therefore, the task of sponsors is *not* to accomplish these transitions while keeping everyone (including themselves) feeling secure and content. Rather, their job is to help people establish different expectations and to give them the tools, support, and guidance they need to succeed in the new situations they face.

When this mindset is in play...	If it is not being demonstrated...
Sponsors recognize that pursuing major change inevitably creates discomfort. They work to ensure that indicators of realization, rather than how happy people are with what is taking place, are used to measure success. Once the appropriate success measures are in place, sponsors concentrate on helping people achieve them.	Sponsors assume they can keep everything running smoothly with little uneasiness or tension during major transitions. They downplay the expressions of concern or outright resistance as aberrations that do not warrant attention. They view how upbeat and content people are as indicators of success and interpret symptoms to the contrary as signs of failure.

6. Realization of transformational change requires strong teamwork.

At no time is "team" more important than during transformational change. When an organization is planning and executing a strategic shift, leaders of functional and/or geographic groups need to be united in word and in action as never before—rallying around a common set of objectives and recognizing their interdependencies to accomplish the desired outcome. It is therefore essential that sponsors foster environments in which team members trust one another and are willing to make personal and collective sacrifices, if needed, to reach full realization of the endeavor's intended purpose.

When this mindset is in play…	If it is not being demonstrated…
Sponsors take ownership of creating strong teamwork within their areas of responsibility, as well across various organizational boundaries. They go beyond reiterating "party line" commitments—they make personal promises regarding what will get done. They consistently act in the best interest of realizing the intended change outcomes, even when doing so requires sacrifice within their own areas of responsibility…and they expect no less from others.	Sponsors lack the ability and/or willingness to foster a sense of strong teamwork within their own sphere of responsibility. If they do create cohesion inside their own ranks, this doesn't usually extend to other groups. Their support for the change is limited due to prioritizing what is best for themselves and/or their areas of responsibility. Silo thinking, pet projects, sacred cows, and favored relationships take precedence over realization of the change.

7. Sponsors can't transform their organizations unless they are willing to transform themselves.

Many sponsors are eager to determine which parts of the organization (or which individuals or teams) are in need of significant shifts in order to accomplish intended outcomes. Fewer are prepared to see themselves as in need of any substantial learning and/or adjustments. These sponsors are the ones who tend to view their own clarity of intent, commitment to action, and communication skills as impeccable; therefore, any obstacles to realization must reside with others.

The reasons for this attitude vary; two common ones are fragile egos and emotional insecurities. However, there is an additional factor that contributes to incumbent leaders being particularly vulnerable to this mindset. Generally speaking, leaders who have worked within an organization for an extended period of time are a product of the very culture that transformational change has them

attempting to reshape. They may not be aware of how extensive the old culture's influence is on their perceptions and judgment, and they may therefore be blind to the fact that new knowledge and skills are required to fulfill their sponsor duties.

For this reason, it is essential that sponsors—and especially those who have a long, successful history with their organization—enter each major change initiative carrying the lessons from the past, while also possessing an open mind and the humility required to seek new and better ways to execute change successfully.

When this mindset is in play…	If it is not being demonstrated…
Leaders recognize that they need to raise the bar continually on their own performance as sponsors during major change. Regardless of their level in the organization, they are prepared to be "students" of the change process and are willing to seek whatever new knowledge or skills are necessary to perform their sponsor duties and effectively influence others throughout the organization.	Leaders have difficulty embracing a learner perspective, because this would mean admitting they may not have all the answers. They think they don't need any special guidance to function in their sponsor role, and/or they are unwilling to engage in meaningful modifications of their own style of operation. These leaders are often quick to delegate implementation matters to others down in the organization and have people at lower levels participate in change management training but do not participate themselves.

8. Success depends on learning from mistakes.

Transformational change sets up a rich environment for blunders in both judgments and deeds— when living on the edge, missteps are part of the process of finding what's possible. Yet there is an important distinction between *failures* and *corrective mistakes*. Failures are shortfalls that render no

value: People miss the mark, and the situation produces no learning. Corrective mistakes take place when underperformances lead to learning and growth.

Facing poor decisions or errors is not a pleasant experience, but doing so is fundamental to developing competence in any new circumstance. Sponsors make plenty of mistakes as they acquire the skills needed to perform their role properly; the only question is whether they will have the humility, patience, and tenacity to learn from these experiences.

When this mindset is in play...	If it is not being demonstrated...
Sponsors readily acknowledge their mistakes, accept feedback, and reflect on and learn from the errors. They also promote cultural messages and consequences that help reverse the tendency to hide miscalculations and instead encourage learning both what can be gained from mistakes and how people can recover from the inevitable errors that happen.	Sponsors inhibit their own development by ignoring feedback and refusing to acknowledge and learn from inevitable slipups. In turn, they reinforce this thinking in others by punishing people when expectations aren't met, whether the errors that produced those shortfalls lead to important learning or not.

9. Everyone struggles with the implications of significant change.

Every member of an organization has some reservations when major change comes their way. And sponsors have no less of a need to address their own fears and concerns about a change than anyone else. In fact, it is normal for sponsors' optimism to waver on occasion. Assuming the issues of concern can be resolved or sufficiently mitigated, this is actually a useful part of the overall implementation process—it means they are delving deeper into the practical realities of realizing fundamental transformation.

The paradox is that readiness for change is fostered, not hindered, by surfacing and addressing doubts. Without coming to terms with the dangers as well as the opportunities that surface, sponsors can become consumed with their own misgivings and reservations about the very initiatives they are responsible for implementing. The good news is that once they have come out on other side of their apprehensions, sponsors typically feel better prepared and more determined to reach the stated objectives.

When this mindset is in play…	If it is not being demonstrated…
Sponsors don't assume they (or any other sponsor) are immune to having qualms about the change. They know that to be fully prepared for their role, they must surface, express, and explore their own fears and concerns. They consider apprehensions a normal part of the transition process and have come to trust that the pathway to deep commitment is through doubt.	Sponsors expect that they (and others) will perform their role without questioning it. When—not if—they do experience fears and anxieties, they believe they should not openly acknowledge, much less examine, them. This can lead to sponsors inadvertently conveying mixed signals and jeopardizing a project's success.

10. Communications and consequences must be aligned.

Strong, consistent communication and related consequences must work hand in hand to support transformational success, and the responsibility for coordinating these two elements belongs to sponsors.

At all levels of an organization, it is the sponsors who are accountable for communicating the what, why, how, and when of a new initiative and for ensuring that the messages are understood by all affected. To accomplish this, they must ensure there is a properly planned and carried-out communications campaign that introduces people to the change, positions it as a crucial imperative, outlines both the benefits and risks to the organization and to those involved, specifies what is

expected, addresses as many concerns as possible, and manages information needs throughout the implementation process. To be effective, the communications campaign must include two-way channels that facilitate active input from stakeholders impacted by the change and create open, organization-wide dialogue. Effective sponsors understand the power of listening and use the insights they gain to focus their influence and impact.

Still, sponsors need to go beyond merely informing people; they need to "enroll" agents, advocates, and targets into the change's success. In other words, these individuals must see full realization as being in their best interest, as well as the best interest of the organization. When orchestrating vitally important transformations, sponsors must therefore make certain that communications are designed and carried out in such a way as to accomplish this critical outcome.

Likewise, only sponsors have the authority—and responsibility—to administer consequences to those who support (or do not support) the change initiative. Far too often, leaders espouse the rhetoric of change but fail to follow through with meaningful rewards or punishments. When this happens, people hear how important it is to fully realize a change but see little evidence that pursuing the change will be beneficial to them or that resisting will be detrimental.

When communications and consequences are well aligned, they reinforce one another and together contribute to the implementation process proceeding as planned. Alternatively, failure to leverage each in a way that supports the other tends to be fatal to full change realization.

When this mindset is in play...	If it is not being demonstrated...
Sponsors at all levels of the organization effectively communicate the strategic intent of the change and what is expected of those involved. They then hold people accountable for successfully executing the change and consistently administer both positive and negative consequences, as appropriate.	Sponsors ignore or stay uninvolved in communicating key aspects of the initiative, resulting in varied and often counterproductive results. Consequences are then either absent or inconsistently applied.

While effective sponsors possess a multitude of mindset patterns, the ten listed here are particularly important when pursuing major change. Successful sponsors recognize the nature of change: that it is risky, messy, and uncomfortable. They value teamwork while understanding that, as important as input and feedback are, consensus is no substitute for strong, decisive leadership. They maintain a "learner mindset," are intent on drawing key lessons from their own mistakes, and foster these qualities in others. Finally, these leaders work hard to align what they say about the importance of the change with the consequences—both positive and negative—that they apply. Collectively, these mindsets are foundational to what is needed for sponsors to further an agenda of fundamental change.

But mindsets are only part of the equation. Sponsors' behaviors are another key factor.

SPONSOR BEHAVIORS

The majority of leaders who navigate major change well do so in an intuitive fashion. That is, they pursue many of the right actions, but when asked about their guiding strategy, they describe operating more from gut instinct than intentional design. They are usually short on details as to any

purposeful framework they employ and often muse, "It seems that most of the time I'm somehow able to make things work out."

These "unconsciously competent" sponsors enjoy a degree of change success. However, their gains are limited in two respects. First, because these leaders do not understand the sponsorship competencies they possess, they are often erratic in their application. Second, since unconsciously competent sponsors can't articulate what they do to foster change realization, they have trouble imparting their knowledge and skills to others. This makes it difficult for peers and colleagues to use them as role models and learn how to become better sponsors.

Conversely, leaders who consistently accomplish transformative change outcomes and help others learn how to do the same tend to be deliberate, definitive, and overt about how they perform their sponsor responsibilities. They intentionally display and openly discuss behaviors that reflect the following characteristics:

1. Purposeful

Expresses dissatisfaction with the present state: Is keenly aware that the organization cannot afford to fail at the change; uses "pain messages" to reinforce that there is no going back to the previous status quo

Clearly defines the change: Creates as specific a picture as possible of the desired future state, including the overall intent of the change

Shapes expectations: Establishes clear and explicit expectations about what will be accomplished, why it will be done, what it will cost (in financial and nonfinancial currencies), and when it will be accomplished

Provides focus: Concentrates the organization's limited mindshare, energy, and capacity to absorb change on crucially imperative initiatives

2. Attentive

Conveys progress: Uses both formal and informal channels to share information about the initiative's progress in ways that build and maintain people's support and prompt action

Understands the impact of culture: Appreciates the powerful influence that mindsets and behaviors exert and is careful to ensure alignment between the organization's culture and the change

Recognizes the human impacts of the change: Acknowledges the complex web of relationships that comprise the human landscape and grasps the impact his or her transition-related decisions and actions will have on the individuals (and groups) who must commit to the initiative for it to succeed. Communicates with others in a manner that demonstrates a priority placed on attending to the human response to change

Requires vigilance: Understands his or her responsibility for managing the risks that are inherent in any major change effort; requires reliable tracking and reporting; and rewards early risk identification that enables quick, responsive risk mitigation

Protects capacity: Insists on monitoring of those affected by the initiative to ensure they can absorb the change and takes corrective action as required

Addresses resistance: Views resistance as inevitable during major change; anticipates and deals with it effectively throughout the change process and expects others to do the same

3. Committed

Demonstrates public conviction: Understands the importance of publicly expressing commitment; openly demonstrates the depth of his or her personal determination for the endeavor to succeed

Demonstrates private tenacity: Uses "behind-the-scenes" actions to demonstrate personal persistence that shows he or she is not just paying "lip service" to the change endeavor

Fosters commitment: Operates on the basis that building commitment in others is a process—one that requires skillfully planned and executed communications, active involvement, and consequences

Communicates powerfully: Uses clear, accurate, and compelling language when communicating about the change, especially when engaging others about why achieving realization is a crucial imperative

Applies consequences: Effectively uses positive and negative reinforcement to sanction the change and drive its tactical objectives as well as its strategic goals

Learns to sponsor: Accepts that effective sponsorship requires an ongoing openness to new ways of thinking and behaving; exhibits an appreciation for the importance of learning from experience

4. Decisive

Makes tough decisions: Demonstrates the courage and discipline to make unpopular decisions; engages actions that might not be in his or her short-term best interest in order to reach full realization of the change's intent

Allocates resources: Accurately assesses the competing demands for resources, including the potential for overload, resistance, and cultural misalignment; assigns the resources necessary for change success

Cascades and broadens sponsorship: Builds a strong network of sponsorship that extends to all parts of the organization impacted by the change

Monitors intent: Requires that the initiative's progress be closely tracked, so as to make any adjustments necessary to ensure progress toward the stated intent and to avoid unhelpful diversions

5. Resolute

Focuses on realization: Is tenacious and unrelenting about fully realizing the intent of the change; does not accept installation outcomes as sufficient for key initiatives

Sustains support: Invests resources, energy, and attention in the initiative as long as necessary to achieve the realization outcomes

Orchestrates key roles: Ensures that he or she, as well as other sponsors, change agents, targets, and advocates, fully understand and are properly prepared to perform their designated roles

Holds peers accountable: Recognizes the importance of sponsors partnering across organizational lines to accomplish the change objectives; compels peer sponsors to speak candidly, offer and accept feedback, and surface issues that could derail the change effort

Bears the price: Accepts the personal and/or political costs of succeeding with transformational change and holds other sponsors accountable for doing the same

"Unconsciously *in*competent" sponsors not only fail to engage in many of these behaviors, but they often aren't even aware of such shortcomings. Meanwhile, unconsciously competent sponsors may exhibit many or even most of these behaviors, but their performance is often inconsistent, and they aren't likely to be effective at fostering similar behaviors in other leaders. Over time, reliable success with numerous transformational change endeavors is associated with sponsors who are "consciously competent" at applying the behaviors listed above—they are aware of the knowledge and skills they possess, and they apply these in ways that help others learn how to reach full realization.

MANAGING THE CHANGE PROCESS

Sponsors who possess the mindsets and demonstrate the behaviors discussed in the preceding pages have a clear sense of the organizational dynamics they must orchestrate when their organization needs to move from the present state to a future, desired state (see Figure 1).

To achieve this movement (whether for a narrowly focused change effort or for one that is part of a sweeping set of changes associated with an ambitious new strategy), targets in the present state must enter the transition state. This is a period of uncertainty and insecurity that disrupts the way they have been doing things and draws them toward a new frame of reference.
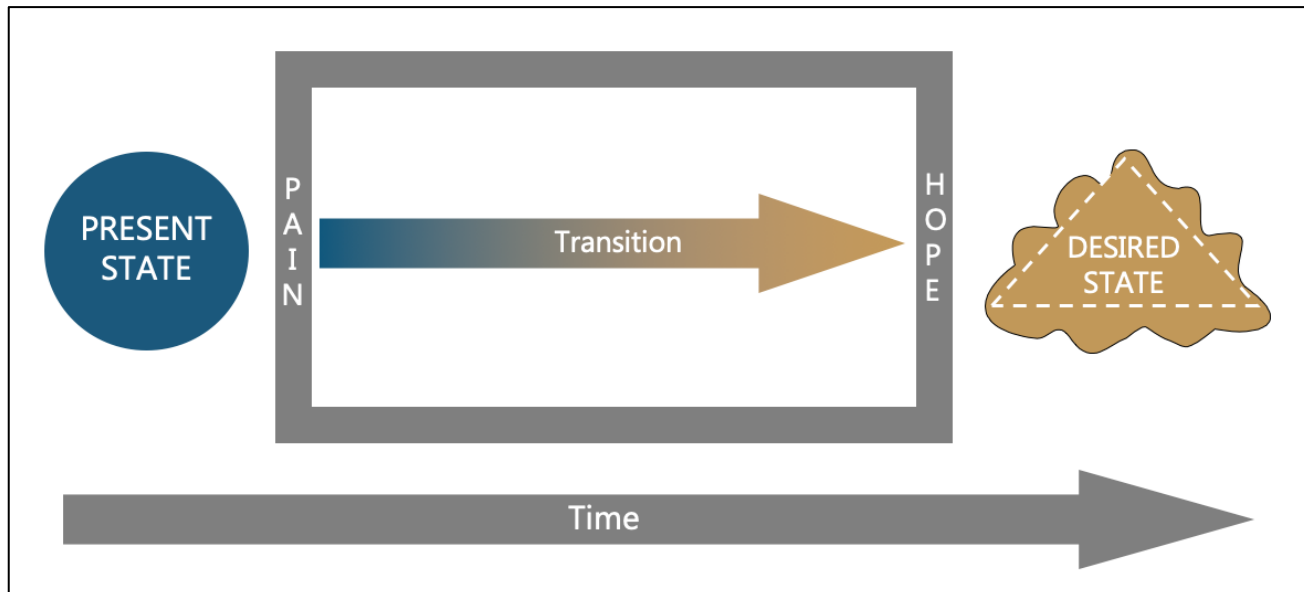
Figure 1. Change Is a Process

But what would cause a person or group to be willing to move from a familiar present state to an ambiguous transition state?

One obvious motivator might be the desire to enjoy whatever benefits are available if the solution is successfully engaged; however, attraction to the desired state is not enough for significant change to be sustained. An equally powerful motivator must also be in place: the "pain" associated with maintaining the way things have been. In other words, people must be repelled by what they have. Individuals and groups will maintain a significant change *only* if they are shown that the status quo is more expensive than the price for transition. This means the pain of the present is a prime impetus for movement toward an uncertain future. Maintaining a competitive edge in the marketplace inevitably requires vigilance in assessing the implications of sustaining the status quo.

Pain management is the conscious orchestration of information to help those targeted for change to understand that the price for the status quo is no longer worth it. The pain of the status quo is not

more important than the attractiveness of the solution, but it is typically more neglected in sponsor communications, which is why we are addressing it here.

Two kinds of pain are powerful enough to sustain change: current and anticipated. Both arise from unresolved problems and/or the possibility of missed opportunities. This creates four possible ways to see that the price of maintaining the status quo is prohibitively high. Figure 2 illustrates these four scenarios and provides examples for each.

	Problem	**Opportunity**
Current	**Situation:** "We're in trouble now." **Examples:** Suddenly losing a major source of revenue, facing new political or logistical barriers to delivering goods or services, and/or experiencing a sudden industry disruption	**Situation:** "If we act immediately, we can leverage this situation to gain market share." **Example:** Rapidly reconfiguring assets and resources to take advantage of new technology or fill a new consumer need
Anticipated	**Situation:** "We're going to be in trouble." **Example:** Observing a long-term trend of declining revenues from traditional revenue streams or anticipating agile new players entering the market, as well as emerging disruptive technologies	**Situation:** "In the future, we could be in a position to make a significantly greater impact." **Example**: Developing digital tools to more effectively and efficiently accomplish business objectives

Figure 2. Price of Status Quo

Regardless of the status quo "price" category, the critical task is to generate sufficient pain to motivate but not immobilize. This balancing act is a key skill that leaders must master if they want to successfully sponsor major change.

SPONSOR RELATIONSHIPS

The strategies used to manage the change process depend on the various relationships between sponsors, agents, targets, and advocates. Relationships between these roles usually take one of three forms shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5.
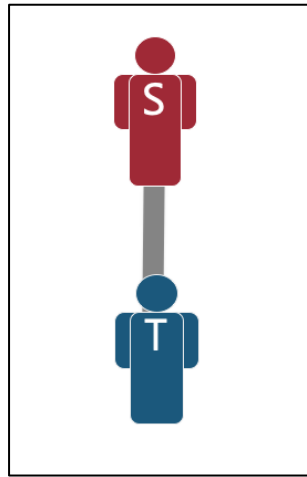
Figure 3. Linear Relationships

The simplest kind of relationship to understand is the *linear* relationship. An example of this would be when a target reports directly to a sponsor. In linear relationships, sponsors often serve as their own change agents (hence why there is no agent visible in Figure 3). This kind of target-to-sponsor relationship may not always be successful in implementing change, but it's an easy one to relate to because it is based on a simple hierarchy or chain of command.
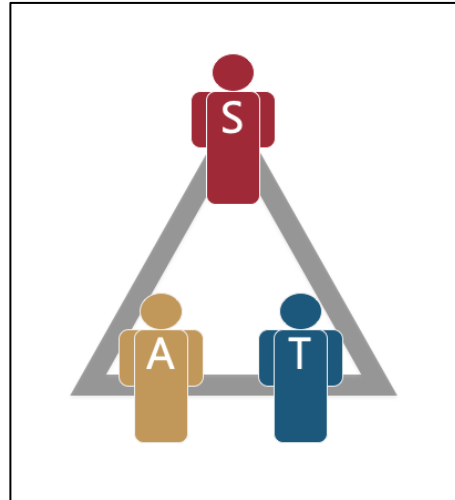

Figure 4. Triangular Relationships

The second kind of relationship is *triangular* in nature. Here, both the agent and the target report to a common sponsor, but the target does not report to the agent. A classic triangle occurs when the sponsor is in senior management, the agent is in a functional group like IT or HR, and the target is in "line management" like production, solution design, customer service, or client delivery. Most

triangles are dysfunctional because sponsors try to pass their sponsorship duties to agents. An example of this would be a sponsor telling an agent it is his or her job to get targets in customer service to comply with the new computer system or human resources policy.

Our research has shown conclusively that sponsors in a triangle relationship who successfully effect change execute sponsorship duties themselves rather than delegating them to change agents. They turn directly to the target and say, unequivocally, "I am the one who wants this change to occur. The agent is simply here to help you do what I have requested. I am driving this change, not IT or HR." Direct, emphatic sponsorship significantly lowers the resistance and dysfunction inherent to most triangular relationships.
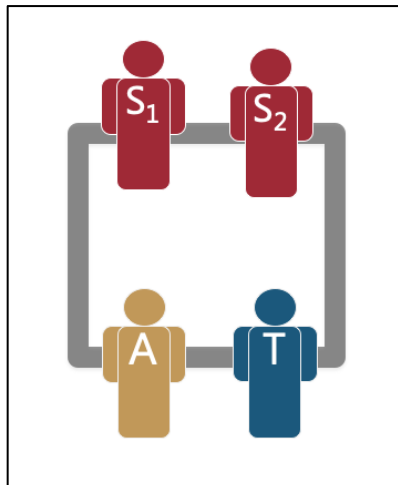

Figure 5. Square Relationships

The *square* relationship represents another problematic configuration. In these situations, not only does the target not report to the agent, but the target also does not report to the agent's sponsor. If the sponsor of the proposed action (S_1) has any hope of successful implementation, he or she must convince the target's sponsor (S_2) that the change is a crucial imperative. Since S_1 lacks the power to legitimize the change in this other part of the organization (or perhaps in another entity within a federated structure), this sponsor in effect becomes an advocate: someone who must secure others to sponsor whatever change they desire. This kind of configuration is quite common in matrixed organizations that rely on cross-functional teams for customer or client delivery, where managers depend on leading through influence versus positional authority to be effective.

An understanding of these relationships is essential, because most large change projects involve numerous sponsors, each engaged in one or more of these configurations. It's essential that sponsors not only recognize and prepare to carry out the duties of their role, but also that they understand the relationship configuration in which they are operating. Whether linear, triangular, or square relationships are involved, sponsors must enlist support down and across their organizations in order to achieve success and fully realize the intent of their change.

CASCADING SPONSORSHIP

In most major change projects, there are two kinds of sponsors. The *initiating sponsor* is the one who first legitimizes a change. This person has the organizational power to authorize the action. It's interesting to note that the idea for a change doesn't have to originate with the initiating sponsor. In many situations, the initiating sponsor doesn't even fully understand the change he or she is approving—yet, without sponsor support, not much happens. What's important here is that a sponsor has the power to sanction change and to allocate people and other resources to the effort. Without this legitimization, substantive, durable change will not occur.

Although initiating sponsors are extremely important, they usually must gain the support of *sustaining sponsors*: leaders at lower tiers who are closest to the target population. A typical instance occurs when a project requires acceptance by people who may not have direct contact with the initiating sponsor. For example, with enterprise-wide initiatives, sustaining sponsors are usually midlevel managers who legitimize the changes at their level of responsibility. They manage communications and consequences at the local level to accomplish the specific objectives necessary for the strategic directives to succeed.

When an initiating sponsor fails to generate commitment at the local level via sustaining sponsors, a black hole[2] develops. An initiating sponsor who discovers a black hole has three options:

- Use communications and consequences to help weak sustaining sponsors see that supporting the change is in the organization's and/or their own best interest

- Replace uncommitted or incapable sponsors with those who are more supportive and/or skilled at the role

- Prepare to fail to achieve the stated change objective within the original time and budget constraints
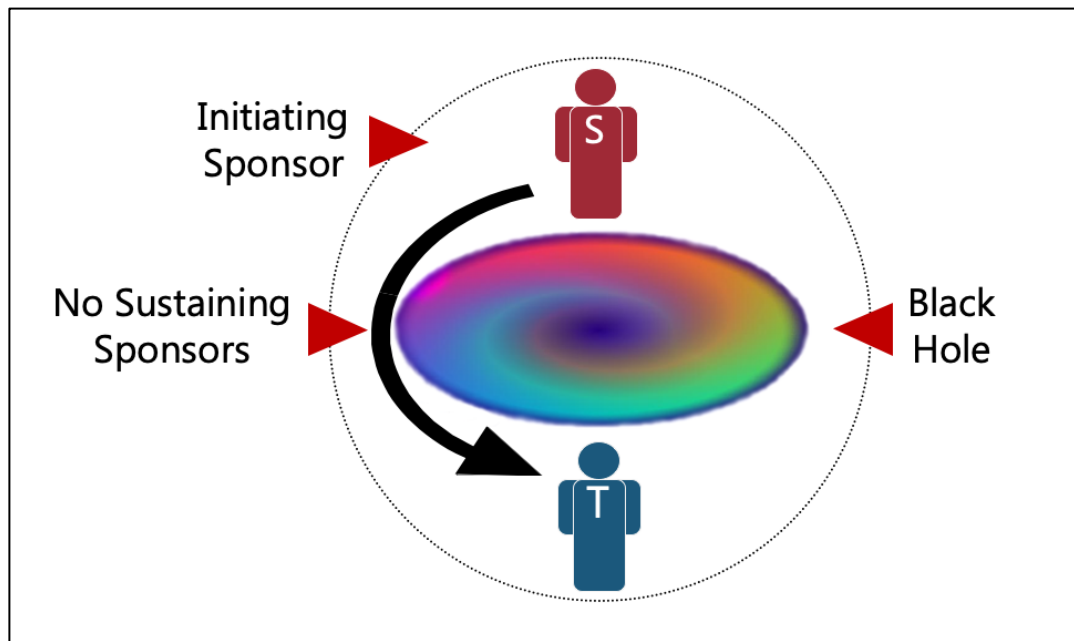

Figure 6. Black Hole

Successful implementation of substantive change cannot occur without committed initiating and sustaining sponsors at all levels. An all-too-common situation among organizations with regional

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[2] In astrophysics, a black hole is an object that exerts such a strong gravitational pull that everything in the surrounding area is sucked in, never to resurface again. We use this as a metaphor for the same dynamic occurring during organizational change: when the rhetoric of change commitment emanates from initiating sponsors but never reaches the intended targets because of a failure to enroll sustaining sponsors to convey the message.

offices is where senior leaders announce changes—for example, a new organizational structure or a set of new priorities, policies, or programs—with great fanfare and often to general enthusiasm from the staff. Yet months later, these leaders (the *initiating sponsors*) are surprised and frustrated to find that the changes are not being implemented consistently across all parts of their organization, and realization is nowhere in sight. More often than not, they discover upon closer examination that leaders at the regional, office, department, and/or team level have been unwilling or unable to sponsor the changes with their local teams. In other words, black holes have emerged where there is a sponsorship vacuum. These local leaders have either not communicated the changes and/or failed to apply appropriate consequences to back up their words. Only when the initiating sponsors address this lack of *sustaining* sponsorship is there any chance that the required changes will take root and generate the desired outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Effective sponsorship is the foundation of transformational change. Without knowing how to serve in this role well, leaders cannot hope to steer their organization through a turbulent, challenge-ridden landscape. Yet the qualities of a strong sponsor are hard to come by, and if left up to chance, leaders are likely to fall short of expectations and jeopardize their change initiative.

To navigate the treacherous waters of change, sponsors must develop several specific mindsets: They must acknowledge that change is messy, risky, and uncomfortable while remaining open to input, feedback, and learning and still make confident, intuitive decisions. Together, these mindsets will ultimately cultivate behaviors that are purposeful, attentive, committed, decisive, and resolute—all of which are necessary to realize critically important change.

And while these characteristics are necessary to successfully realize the intent of a change, they are not sufficient. Effective sponsors must understand and appreciate the process of change in order to properly manage its dynamics—particularly *pain management*. They must cultivate the proper sponsor relationships and ensure that sponsorship is cascaded down and across their organization. In

this way, leaders will cultivate essential support throughout the organization for accomplishing and sustaining necessary change.

Conner Partners will continue to monitor and study the factors that are aiding or impeding the progress of leaders and their organizations as they adapt to—and hopefully thrive in—this unprecedented environment of change and disruption. We invite you to download our other research papers and follow our future insights on our website, connerpartners.com.

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Prior to starting Conner Advisory, Ed was a partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) where he headed up the US People and Organization consulting practice. In this role, Ed was responsible for leading a team of more than 400 practitioners who helped clients execute large-scale strategic change. Before that, he served as President and Chief Executive Officer of The Forum Corporation, where he advised senior business leaders involved in major change initiatives.

A recognized leader in the field of strategy execution, Ed co-authored *Strategic Speed: Mobilize People, Accelerate Execution* (Harvard Business Press, 2010), which provides a blueprint for leaders who are executing transformational change in their organizations. Ed earned his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. While at Penn, he also received The Wharton School Certificate in Business Administration. Ed is currently a strategic advisor to the NeuroLeadership Institute, an international organization that applies the insights of brain science to organizational performance and leadership development.