

Transformation: the Role of the Executive Sponsor

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Organizational change is risky, and reported failure rates for transformation projects are high. Projects often fail because of an over-emphasis on the “science”, or the tools and techniques, of project management and a lack of attention to the “art”, or the people-related aspects of organizational change. Weaknesses in project management and in project governance are common reasons for project failure when an art and science-based approach to transformation is not adopted. The Executive Sponsor of an organizational change project plays an important role in ensuring the success of the transformation using an art and science based approach in these areas.



Effective governance of a transformation project involves establishing a strong governance structure and effective processes; ensuring that the project is executed to high standards of ethics, transparency and accountability, and ensuring that the interests of relevant stakeholders are represented in the initiative and that these stakeholders are kept adequately informed of project progress and consulted as necessary.

Preparing the organization for a successful “art and science” based transformation consists of two key responsibilities: selection of the Project Manager and conducting an organizational change readiness assessment. The Executive Sponsor should determine the types and balance of art and science skills needed for management of the transformation project, and ensure that selection tools that effectively assess both types of skills are used. Staff surveys and interviews can be used to investigate the cultural and people-related aspects of cultural readiness, but there is also a need to analyse the organization’s “systemic change shaping levers” such as the compensation and rewards system and the performance management system. Based on the findings of the change readiness assessment, the Executive Sponsor should work with the Project Manager and other stakeholders on initiatives to improve change readiness if necessary.

Finally, the Executive Sponsor plays an important role in ensuring that project achieves the desired transformation objectives and not just its operational goals. To do this, they must first ensure that the project’s goals properly reflect the strategic objectives of the transformation and are aligned with the organization’s core values and purpose. They will also act as the executive level connector and facilitator, ensuring that relevant senior stakeholders are aware of their own roles and responsibilities with regard to the project and representing their interests and perspectives to the Project Manager.

To effectively carry out their role on a transformation project, the Executive Sponsor, like the Project Manager, needs the right combination of art and science skills. An effective Executive Sponsor will

possess good political acumen, negotiation and communications skills and the ability to form trust-based relationships with stakeholders, among other art skills. They also need a broad awareness of the “science” of project management and transformation in order to work effectively with the Project Manager, ensure that a systematic approach to the project is followed, and understand quantitative performance measures and their implications.

Together, the Executive Sponsor and the Project Manager must possess the right combination of art and science skills, which will vary depending on factors such as project complexity and numbers of stakeholders. Getting the right balance of art and science is the key to successful transformation.

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