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Executive Transitions

Four types of executive sponsorship to catalyze change initiatives

By Ajit Kambil

Paving the path for change

Incoming CXOs, in their roles as leaders in a company, should consider what they will likely sponsor. Unlike direct leadership of a project or initiative, sponsorship is more subtle and indirect. It often takes the form of shaping the context where others lead and drive an initiative to success.

Sponsorship could include the provision of tangible resources to make a project more successful. For example, as a leader, you may be able to provide capital, people, customer connections, or subject matter resources to enable an innovation to be prototyped, tested, and brought to the market. Sponsor-

ship could also be more symbolic and less tangible. It could be the provision of specific job and project opportunities for high-potential individuals so that they can learn and extend their skills from new experiences. It could be about bringing the prestige of your office or your personal commitment to recognize and give visibility to a project or an individual. It could even be giving room for and tolerating the failure of a high-risk project because the team dared to try to engage the unknown or do something truly difficult to accomplish.

Sponsorship can be an important activity for C-suite leaders. It can catalyze new behaviors you wish to manifest in your company. It can also be an

amplifier of the changes you wish to bring about by having others lead change initiatives aligned to your objectives. Yet, I find that few executives systematically think about how to use sponsorship as a means to catalyze change.

The four sponsorships of leaders

In our Transition Labs, I find that there are four specific sponsorships that incoming leaders should consider focusing on. These are: innovation, collaboration, leadership development, and brand. Each of these ties to the four faces of the CXO as strategist, catalyst, steward, and operator.¹ The four sponsorships, which lie at the intersections of the four faces of CXO leadership, are illustrated and discussed below:

1. **Innovation:** Innovation brings to life something new that enables a company to go from the present to a new and different future. There can be many types of innovation that create many different futures. Doblin, a part of Deloitte, offers a useful typology of 10 innovations, ranging from the profit model a company chooses, to its product features, to the experience realized by the customer (see the [Doblin model](#)). When sponsoring innovation, it is important to choose a locus of innovation that is aligned with the strategy and objectives of the company. For example, if the focus of the company strategy is to improve productivity, process, and supply chain, network innovations are more likely to deliver the desired results. If the strategic focus of the company is on improving market share, then channel and customer experience innovations may be more aligned to the strategy.
2. **Collaboration:** Sponsoring collaboration and connection within or across organizations can enable critical access to ideas and other resources that help companies innovate or improve the

Figure 1. Four faces of the CXO



Source: Based on the Deloitte CFO Program's Four Faces of the CFO Framework.

execution of initiatives. For example, many interesting business opportunities now lie outside the boundaries of traditional functions or firms and at the intersection of different fields. In health care, many CEOs find drugs, diagnostics, devices, and nutrition are converging in care solutions for critical illnesses.² In academia, provosts and deans often find the need to encourage collaborations across different colleges and departments to meet changing demands for new knowledge and research. For example, the emergence of e-commerce required marketing and information technology to collaborate for more data-driven insights. As a C-suite leader, sponsoring collaboration across organization silos may not only enable innovation but also reduce inefficiencies in the organization resulting from disparate systems and processes.

3. *Leadership*: A key responsibility of C-suite leaders is to develop the next generation of leaders through sponsorship. Sponsors can create opportunities and advocate for their high-potential staff to undertake assignments that develop leadership skills. As a considerable part of leadership is confronting and engaging the unknown, this may include assignments in areas that staff members may not have engaged with, such as leading an M&A deal or integration or the negotiation for and beginning of a new international joint venture.

As we found in our 2009 study of women chief financial officers (CFOs) at leading companies, sponsorship is far more important than mentorship.³ While mentors can counsel an individual, sponsors can deliver opportunities that accelerate individual careers. One way for CEOs and other C-suite members to sponsor leadership opportunities is to create chief of staff roles into which high-potential individuals rotate for a year or two. In such roles, the professional directly assists the CEO or, for instance, the CFO can give the individual broad exposure to the kind of complex problems, decision-making, and the key stakeholders they would likely work with in the future. Other sponsorship models may include selecting individuals for stretch assignments within the company.

4. *Brand and values*: A fourth area that C-suite leaders can sponsor is the brand and values of

their organization to external and internal stakeholders. Brand and values are expressed by the offerings and conduct of the organization and its staff vis-à-vis its key stakeholders. They can be manifested in one's own meetings and personal conduct with stakeholders such as customers, the community, employees, and prospective employees. Alternatively, they can be expressed via giving, volunteering, and other programs you enable for others in your organization to participate in that embody the best of your organization. You can also provide visibility to those who represent the behaviors and beliefs that embody your brand and values by recognizing them. The sponsorship of brand and values serves to enhance the reputation and social capital of the organization with its key stakeholders. It can help propagate the cultural attributes of the organization to new generations of employees.

Making sponsorship work

I find many CXOs in my Transition Labs do not have an explicit sponsorship strategy. From the observations in our labs, those leaders who stand out as sponsors commit to *focus*, *plan commitments*, and *communicate* as a means of increasing returns from their sponsorship investments. These are discussed below.

FOCUS

Managing time and attention are often the greatest constraints for leaders. Given the demands of C-suite roles, many executives in these positions can only commit between 5 and 10 percent of their workweek to sponsorship. For a 60-hour target workweek, this ranges between three and six hours a week. Thus, for your sponsorship to translate into meaningful outcomes, it should be focused on a few key choices. Perhaps, of the four key sponsorships, you could choose to focus initially on one or two of them—such as innovation and leadership.

It is important to be clear and tangible about the results you expect from each sponsorship. For example, on innovation, some leaders may say they want to hear the “best innovative ideas” and run a suggestion box in their company as an attempt to demonstrate sponsorship of innovation. This may have some use in surfacing an opportunity, but is generally meaningless unless substantive resources or commitments are then made to turn a specific

idea into reality. Effective sponsorship is choosing to focus on and enabling specific initiatives with tangible objectives and results. As the old adage goes, people judge you by what they see you do versus what you say. Broad statements about innovation, collaboration, leadership, or brand without substantive and tangible commitment and actions do not demonstrate leadership as a sponsor.

Generally the CEO role has the greatest breadth of sponsorship choices. Other CXO roles usually have fewer choices and will likely want to align their choices with the priorities of their CEO and company.

PLAN FOR COMMITMENTS

Beyond focus, it is important to make commitments to what you sponsor to enable it to be successful. The first and the most important commitment is the choice of the initiative and, especially, its leader. Does the leader have a track record of delivering other projects in the space? Do they have the qualities that are likely to make them and your sponsorship successful? Choose weak candidates as leaders, and you are likely to lose your own credibility.

Second, establish a plan and resource commitments for your sponsorship. If you are going to sponsor leadership by having a chief of staff role, get the headcount for that role by acquiring new headcount permissions or restructuring your organization to free up headcount. Also, work with HR to find high-potential candidates and think through the experience you will offer that candidate to make the program successful. If you are going to sponsor collaboration across organizational silos, evaluate the commitments you will make to restructure goals and incentives that enable collaboration. By thinking through your sponsorship and making commit-

ments to set context, you can enhance the likelihood of successful sponsorship.

Third, once a leader is selected for an initiative and a forward-looking context is shaped, it is useful to work with the leader to frame how you can support them through different stages of their initiative and establish mutual expectations of each other.

Tangible plans and commitments enhance the likelihood of sponsorship success.

COMMUNICATE

Your sponsorship activities ideally complement and amplify the impact of your other priority initiatives. To amplify the impact, it is critical to communicate your efforts across the organization. This requires integrating your sponsorship activities with your overall communication plan. Sometimes you will drive the communications, for example, making those and what you sponsor visible. At other times, it is those whom you sponsor who communicate their programs and your sponsorship systemically at different levels of the organization. A strong communications strategy can complement your sponsorship strategy.⁴

The takeaway

Sponsorship is an essential responsibility of C-suite leaders. Yet, many first-time CXOs as well as serial CXOs often do not have a clear plan for sponsorship undertakings. Focusing on selecting what to sponsor from the four types of sponsorship—innovation, collaboration, leadership, and brand—and aligning it to your priority initiatives can help you amplify your impact across the organization. Successful sponsorship often requires focus, planning, tangible commitments, and a communications strategy to drive impact.

Dr. Ajit Kambil is the global research director for the CFO program and the creator of Deloitte's Executive Transition Labs.

ENDNOTES

1. Ajit Kambil, *Navigating the four faces of a functional C-level executive*, Deloitte University Press, May 2014.
2. Laura Eselius, Mohan Nimmagada, Ajit Kambil, R. T. Hisey, and John Rhodes, "Managing pathways to convergence in life sciences," *Journal of Business Strategy* 29, no. 2 (2008): pp. 31–42.
3. Ajit Kambil, Isabel Feliciano, and Cathleen Domes, The journey to CFOs: Perspectives from women leaders, *Deloitte CFO Program Report*, September 2009. This report was also republished in January 2012 on Deloitte Insights.
4. Ajit Kambil, *Executive Transitions: Elevate your communications strategy*, Deloitte University Press, December 10, 2015.

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