

How to Find a Sponsor for Your Practice Innovation

By Robert H Sachs, PhD

Research on innovation and the work of the Care Experience Council (CEC) has identified that sponsorship is a key factor supporting the transfer of successful practices.

A Quick Definition of Sponsorship

Sponsorship is a key activity in any change effort. The change management literature defines a sponsor as someone who authorizes, legitimizes, and demonstrates ownership for a specific change initiative. To be an effective sponsor, an individual must possess sufficient organizational influence to either initiate resource commitment (time, people, and money) or reinforce change at the local level.

Sponsorship may originate high in the organization, but it must cascade through every level to the point of the new practice that requires people to change. Failure to achieve this cascading effect creates a "black hole" that effectively stymies transfer.

Generating Sponsorship

Very often, the individual who creates and validates a successful practice is not the same person to sponsor it. To use the CEC language, this person is probably the source champion, and this person's role is different from the sponsor's. In fact, the source champion is often the person who must secure sponsorship. So how does the source champion go about this? Change management theory and practice suggests that securing sponsorship is most effective when it is approached systematically and follows a series of steps.

Define the Need

Define the importance of successful implementation in meaningful terms for the potential sponsor from their frame of reference (FOR). This is critical given the time, effort, and skill required to play a sponsor's role and the potential need for funding.

Define the Change

How large a change is this? What are the measures of success? What are outcomes and the time frame to achieve them? Understanding the magnitude of the change and the time available to achieve success is very important to determining the right sponsorship strategy. The bigger the change and the quicker the time frame to achieve results, the more critical and difficult the sponsorship task.

Who will be Affected?

Knowing who will be affected, who will need to adopt the practice, and where they are located is essential. It's obvious that this information generates the right sponsorship in the right places. Black holes stall or stop implementation, especially if the practice requires change in people, multiple levels, and locations.

Stakeholders

Identify individuals the change does not directly impact or who are not required to be sponsors but who can help the change by being additional champions or change agents. They should be viewed as credible and trustworthy by those people being asked to change. Although

these people may not be able to be sponsors, they can help to sell a change and maintain commitment. They may also have skills to assist directly in implementation.

Role Map

Outline and map all the people to be affected by the change. This picture not only helps to identify where sponsorship is required but also communicates why you need the sponsor and the stakeholders they will need to address.

Once this picture is complete, the potential sponsors can be approached. At this point it is important to be patient. Sponsors need to be clear about what is being asked before committing. They need to agree with or modify the presenting goals, success measures, and suggested time frames. Without this clarity, sponsorship may slip or not materialize at all.

Sponsorship: Making it Effective

Effective sponsorship takes time, effort, and skill. Organizations that transfer practices well understand the importance of sponsorship and work at developing and maintaining their sponsorship. Sponsorship is not just a word. Formalize sponsorship roles in writing. Teach people about the role of sponsorship and how to secure a sponsor; then train and coach them to develop those skills. Because most leadership roles require sponsorship competency, leaders can look for those skills in recruiting new leaders and can finally look for opportunities to connect sponsors with source champions. ♦

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