Pay No Attention to the Man behind the Curtain:

the Executive Sponsor who is enthusiastic but distrusted

By

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Introduction

A critical factor to successful change management efforts is having a strong Executive Sponsor. This individual must be visible, trusted, and engaged throughout the change management effort. Executive Sponsors provide strategic direction, vision, and leadership to the project team, foster collaboration and communication amongst stakeholders, and ensure the realization of benefits and sustainment of the effort (Harrington, 2018). They inspire and drive desire, awareness and acceptance of the change.

Occasionally, Change Practitioners find they have an Executive Sponsor who lacks these essential qualities to ensure success, resulting "in more resistance and slower progress toward realizing the organization's desired results" (PROSCI, 2018). Adoption suffers when it takes on the Executive Sponsor's negative reputation.

This case study describes a situation in which the sponsor of an organizational change was not well-respected, and the tactical attempts by the change team to drive adoption.

Background

While working for a government agency, a need arose for a large-scale organizational change. The change called for creating and abolishing divisions, branches and sections (boxes on the organizational chart, Figure 1) and moving employees and managers between these boxes. These changes added additional layers of management in an already oversized, over-stratified organization.

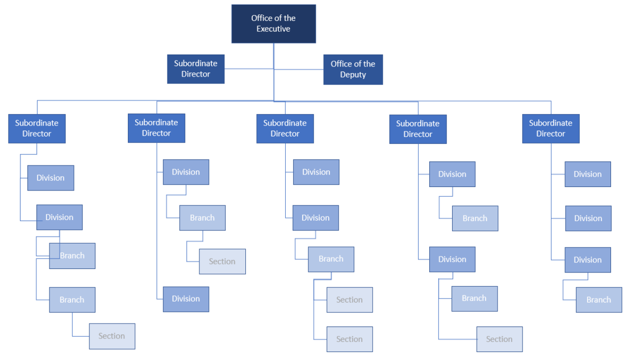

Figure 1, Model of organization before the proposed organizational change. Each "box" on the chart had its own manager, as well as between 8 and 15 employees.

The proposed change called for updated naming conventions, which reflected industry standards. It was an opportunity to institutionalize long-term strategic initiatives that would revolutionize the way the organization conducted its operations.

This organization was comprised of nearly eight hundred employees, half of whom become retirement-eligible in 2020 and who were generally resistant to change. Two-thirds of the employees were associated with a labor union, and the remaining employees were either categorized as non-union or management. The organization had a tumultuous history of poor executive leadership, with turnover at the top occurring approximately every five years.

Prior to this proposed change, the organization had undergone four smaller-scale realignments during the previous two years. During these smaller realignments, boxes were also added or moved, and employees were realigned based very loosely on co-locating functionality. The employees were change saturated: the changes were disruptive, not clearly understood or grounded in well-articulated business needs, and there was too much of it (Creasy, 2009).

The Executive Sponsor

The Executive Sponsor for this large-scale organizational change was the executive in charge of the organization. He had served in this leadership role for nearly a decade, during which he had earned a reputation of brusqueness, having rough-edges, and bullying – not the ideal characteristics of a leader *or* an Executive Sponsor.

The Sponsor prided himself on his blue-collar upbringing, believing the gruffness perceived by his colleagues and peers was scrappiness (a positive trait in his mind). The Sponsor had strained relationships with his subordinate leadership and their employees, and tensions ran very high with labor union leadership. He was aware of his reputation but did not believe he needed to actively repair these surrounding relationships.

There was a lot riding on this organizational change and the Sponsor was enthusiastic about it. He insisted on being the Sponsor due to his leadership role within the organization.

In ideal circumstances, employees should consistently see the Sponsor's commitment to change as a means of driving success; however, this best practice did not happen with this particular Sponsor.

The Approach

As the director for workforce management and strategic human capital initiatives, organizational realignments fell within my purview. In early meetings, I led my change management team in discussions about the roles needed and who would be best positioned to fill them for this effort. We proposed alternative sponsors to the executive under the auspices of his already overtaxed work schedule, our effort to save face and position the change for success. These proposals were declined; we knew they would be, but we had to try anyway.

Executive Sponsor (in Name)

The preceding smaller-scale organizational changes had not been given time to take hold before additional realignments were implemented. The executive's change-churn introduced challenges which he believed he needed to resolve himself, and he insisted on remaining in the role of Sponsor. I knew he could be counted on to define the "overall change goals, scope and definition of success," but he was not best positioned to influence his peers or employees to gain support (ACMP, 2014, p. 18). He got ruffled during Q&A sessions, responding aggressively and emotionally to any perceived resistance to the change. Therefore, we very clearly defined his role: the Executive Sponsor spoke to the organization's need for the change, the vision, and the goals.

We crafted talking points for the Sponsor ("the script") that included language vetted not only by the change team but by the communications specialist assigned to the organization. We limited his in-person interactions - and therefore the potential to negatively influence the impacted employees - by recording introductory videos to limit off-the-cuff remarks and divergence from the script. He was employee-facing only when absolutely necessary. He became the man behind the curtain. The explanatory details would need to be handled by someone else.

Change… Owner

A quick Google search demonstrates the role of Change Owner is not unique to us, albeit used (or advertised) infrequently and colloquially. This isn't something I invented, but it's not part of the canon of standard literature and best practices. After the Sponsor's introductory remarks, the Change Owner was the person we sent out next: a person to discuss the tactical approaches to achieve the strategic vision. Someone who could be honest about the struggles that the change may bring, but who would position those struggles within the context of the overwhelming challenges plaguing the organization at that time. Someone to communicate with employees and managers without appearing condescending or menacing; a cheerleader.

We knew we needed a strong leader to help achieve the vision who was popular and trustworthy - a counterpoint to our Sponsor. We looked within the organization for someone with the functional knowledge to lead with credibility and who could influence and motivate all stakeholders. It was also an opportunity for a subordinate leader without much visibility to step out and assert himself or herself.

The subordinate leader we selected had been hired only eight months prior. He did not carry the baggage of prior executive decisions, and he was generally thought of as an individual with fresh perspectives and a thoughtful approach to his work. He nurtured relationships that had been soured by his predecessor and the executive while he also made inroads with union leadership. His open-door policy was reflected as a literal open door and a free seat at his lunch table. This was an individual who was positioning himself to truly make friends and influence people at the agency; he could "play politics" while embodying the best qualities of servant leader (Williamson, 2017). Universally well-liked and well-respected, we recruited him to be our Change Owner.

Change Agents, Ambassadors and People on the Street

To lessen the appearance that we were trying to hide our Sponsor (which although we were in actuality), we relied on our Change Agents. These individuals were identified because of their varying roles within the organization, their network and their ability to influence change (ACMP, 2014, p. 18). They were thought-leaders and high-performers with various tenure and expertise within the organization, best positioned to model behavior to effect change.

We developed train-the-trainer packages for the Change Agents to use when discussing the change: they had talking points and PowerPoint slides, business cases and trend data to answer almost every question that came their way. And there were many, many questions fueled by confusion and distrust of the executive and his vision for the organization. The Change Agents also had direct access to the me and the Change Owner, and we assembled them biweekly to discuss what they were hearing, experiencing, and where they needed more support. They were our ambassadors, interfacing with stakeholder groups in the broader community to speak enthusiastically about the upcoming organizational change. Each training session or stop on the road show had a different group of speakers. We positioned some of these agents outside our organization to help confront rumors and to promote the benefits of the change. Additionally, we leveraged a working group of our own "squeaky wheel" employees to round out the change management team to demonstrate positive intent, employee engagement and diversity in perspective in executing the change.

Conclusion

There were more people within the agency understanding and discussing the specifics of the organizational change than solely our organization. Through the Change Agents, the message spread across the agency. Our communication plan was thorough and detailed, leveraging communication channels we had not previously considered (i.e., podcasts, micro videos, Ask Me Anything sessions). On the surface, we had positive momentum.

Still, we struggled after we were operational. Beneath the excitement of something new came a suspicion of underhandedness. Our post-implementation surveys reflected an understanding of the business case, the vision for the change, and the long-range potential to the business (success). The newly formed suborganizations were "norming" slowly (also success), but morale dipped dramatically. Our annual agency employee engagement survey results dropped more than 10%, particularly in areas related to having trust on our organization's executive leadership and communication of business decisions. Open-ended questions specifically called out this organizational change as the reason for their dissatisfaction. The change itself was successful, but it shed light on a deeper employee satisfaction concern. Work was needed to repair the relationship between the executive and his employees; a different type of change effort for a different day.

The fact that the vision for the change came from an executive who was universally distrusted and yet employees were adapting to this new norm demonstrates success. They may not have liked the changes, as the survey results reflected, but they accepted it with minimal resistance.

Reimaging the role of the Sponsor by incorporating the companion role of the Change Owner gave the organizational realignment a chance to not be doomed before it launched. The attention given to seeking out the right Change Agents and spending the time to prepare them with the resources and knowledge to address all types of questions was a valuable investment of time, and it became a part of our toolkit for future change activities. We leveraged new ways of communicating, presenting, and socializing the change that we would not have tried had we had a more readily-accepted Sponsor. The potential negative of the "bad" sponsor became an opportunity to innovate, reminding us that as purveyors of change, we sometimes need to adapt ourselves.

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