



N I C H E

# CHANGE PROFESSIONALS' DINNER & DEBATE

DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS

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Dinner &  
Debate  
Sept 2017

## Our guests...

Programme Director - Pharmaceutical Business  
Head of Change & Transformation - Utility Business  
Head of Programmes - Construction Business  
Head of Change - University  
Director of Change & Transformation - Financial Services  
Head of Change - Online Business  
Head of Change - Insurance Business  
Portfolio Director - Automotive Business  
Head of Transformation - IT Solutions Provider  
Programme Director - Solutions Provider  
Portfolio Director - Automotive Business  
Programme Director - Public Sector

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**NICHE TALENT'S LATEST EVENT ON 7TH SEPTEMBER SAW 12 SENIOR BUSINESS CHANGE PROFESSIONALS MEET IN MANCHESTER'S BANYAN TO DISCUSS TWO HOT TOPICS WITHIN THE CHANGE COMMUNITY.**

**THE CONVERSATION OPENED WITH THE QUESTION: WHAT MAKES A GOOD SPONSOR?**

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# What makes a good sponsor?

**The first speaker described how he, and other change professionals he's worked with, have often faced the realisation that change sponsorship has not been as strong as it could, or should have been. He told that ultimately, the success of a change programme is dictated by people, yet those same people aren't always on board with the changes proposed. A sponsor can say, "sure, go ahead", but their true value is only realised when visible and immersed, leading, not micro-managing those opposed to the transformation, from the front.**

One guest responded, "You may have a great sponsor, but perhaps the more difficult question is, 'How do you engage that sponsor?'"

As an example, one attendee offered that CEOs are often appointed as sponsor, yet are frequently away from the business. They're involved in change intermittently whereas those sponsors adding the most value are those who are 'on the ground', communicating change to those affected, and involved with the day-to-day delivery.

While high profile projects are likely to come with a high profile sponsor, the opinion was that someone more connected than a Chief Executive is usually more likely to achieve results.

The room heard too, that change professionals are sometimes given a stakeholder map, but no sponsor. And on the flip side, some had experienced multiple sponsors – a difficult situation where sponsors have different goals, drives and ideas, resulting in timeline changes and delays. Others added that having multiple sponsors would likely result in a lack of ownership too.

When asked if anyone had ever used selection criteria for finding a sponsor, the response was a resounding 'no' – "we're given whoever is available!"...so what happens when that sponsor isn't the best person for the job?





## The role of a sponsor

**“True sponsorship is driving change and clearing blockers. However, I’ve only experienced that once”, shared a guest. “It makes a massive difference; it’s transformational.” Many around the table agreed.**

One guest told that often, the person best placed to be a sponsor within an organisation, lacks the required skills. This normally sees the role defaulting to someone else.

“Sometimes you have a figurehead, but they don’t know how to behave. They get involved in delivery, but this isn’t their role - instead they should be steering, removing blockages, etc.” When a sponsor is a figurehead only, their involvement is unlikely to help to achieve end goals.

It was suggested that in such situations, change management take back control, through questioning exactly what they need from a sponsor. What do you need to achieve? What will help you to get the job done? Ultimately, it’s the role of change professionals to work with differing personalities and characteristics and to use them to their advantage. “Look for opportunities to make things happen”, said an attendee.

## Trust

It would seem that a defining factor of a project’s success is gaining the trust of a sponsor. “Put yourselves in the position of your sponsor”, we were told,

**“They’re not the ones to blame. How often do we introduce ourselves to a sponsor, and say, ‘Here’s a little bit about us and our background...this is my experience, these are my expertise, and this is what I’m here to do.’”**

Until this has happened, why should a sponsor have confidence in us?”

Quite simply, the tech and digital world is alien to a lot of managers, so it’s about proactively maintaining communication to build a solid platform for trust. Have an open, honest and trusting working relationship with your sponsor. If there are still trust issues, get creative, have a conversation – but first think about the different ways you can have that conversation too.





## Culture

The discussion around trust continued, to include the trust of not only sponsors, but that of the entire organisation. “You’re fortunate if you’re in a trusting environment. Normally workplace politics mean that there is a lack of trust.”

There were shared experiences of older, more traditional companies having tight silos, a lack of compliance and countless barriers to change, leading one person to ask “How do you build trust in that kind of environment?”

The suggestion given was that a ‘bubble’ of trust can be created. Rather than taking on the impossible task of shifting the mindset of a whole organisation, work with smaller groups and key stakeholders to gain their trust first, removing blockages gradually and systematically.

## Coaching

And the answer to getting people onside? Coaching.

Often a manager with less knowledge, but who is closer to the business operations is the best kind of sponsor. “We can feed these people information, even prop them up with external support, to help them to become a great sponsor.”

One guest told us that even if a sponsor is great, they don’t always have the time to commit to promoting. “If someone won’t come and walk the floor with you or respond to emails, you have to get clever about that.”

But whether time poor or lacking knowledge, change professionals can guide a sponsor, managing expectations and providing them with confidence.

“Coaching’s so important”, the group heard, “We’re the experts, they’re not. Very few people will actively try to make decisions to derail a programme – they’re usually just doing what they think is right and that’s why have to a duty to educate.”

Those around the table talked about how some sponsors, like anything, are far better at it than others. The challenge for change experts is to be flexible and creative in working with differing organisations, personalities and cultures. It’s also important to regularly revisit the true role of a sponsor...owning the vision.

**“We can help them to become the person we need them to be – morph them into the sponsor that will help us achieve success.”**



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# How do we identify benefits of business change and manage them, through to realisation?

**A Programme Director kicked off the second debate of the evening. She explained how she's previously been told "I want you to build this solution", but has been left asking, why? What's the benefit? What is the business change this technology will bring about?**

**The group was asked, "Do you actually get a clear steer?"**

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Fundamentally, benefits should be the reason behind change. However the experiences of guests were quite different and even within agile, lean value streams, often the benefits of what you're trying to achieve get left by the wayside.

Many around the table agreed that it's easy for organisations to get carried away with project delivery, rather than revisiting and analysing what the change is really about.

**A guest told us that "we face problems when there is a gap between benefits and desire. We get told 'this isn't what we wanted', and only at that point do people realise that what we delivered isn't what is required."**



## It's all about the 'why'

The attendees discussed how always starting with the 'why' is so important. One told us that "It's frustrating when we have all this theory but practice is falling short. More effort needs to be put into mapping and planning."

Another shared "I had to do a report recently reminding the Board what the benefits were." The feeling was that often you're just told to do it. Or sometimes the 'why' is there but the people involved don't want it.

**Agile is all about prioritising value", said one guest, "If I'm being asked to do something, I want to know what the return on investment is – are we adding value?"**

It was clear to see that there are frustrations around this subject, particularly when divisional directors have differing requirements.

Interestingly, talk went back to coaching. It's needed, but there was concern about how people could best coach a CEO who excels in many areas yet isn't a great sponsor. Particularly within very entrepreneurial environments, this was highlighted as a challenge.

One person shared that they had worked on a lot of projects – some huge, some tiny – but they always go back to critical success factors.

The problem is, however, that they are rarely followed. "What we do is complicated. It's important to keep the vision, outcome and critical success factors in sight."

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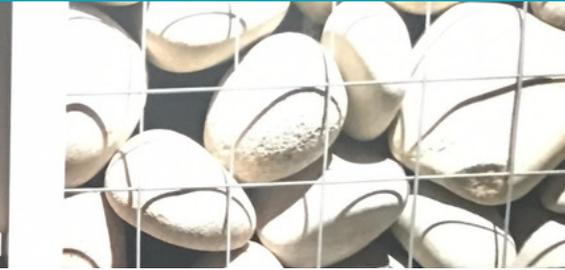
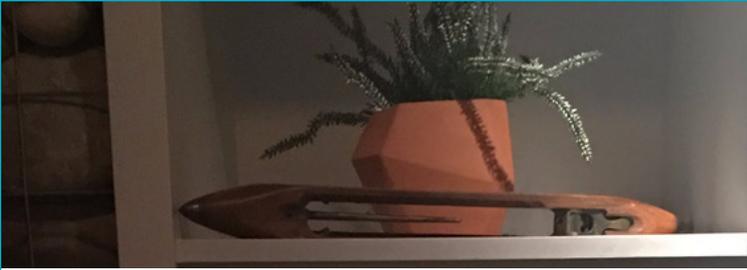
## A change manager's role

According to the group, whilst you do need someone to score and measure, not all benefits are easy to track, "...particularly when you have a longer term project, the overall performance is really tricky." Cost savings are slightly easier to track because you can choose key success metrics for measuring (e.g. business growth over three years), but again, it can be hard to quantify when there are so many more influencing factors than technology alone.

Sometimes, we heard, it's a 'finger in the air', and not everything is quantifiable, but "...you have to acknowledge that both metrics and a gut feel need to be included to come up with a viable conclusion."

Clever finance people help, who take on factors such as the economy, and not just spreadsheet data. Another guest said

**"It goes back to critical success factors. What do we want to see, feel and hear? Then we put the figures to it. It's the outcome, not the output."**



## Ownership

One issue described was a lack of engagement and ownership in teams deciding their priorities. “They don’t off load their needs, but then complain when it goes wrong. But the onus has to be on them, not us.”

One change professional explained how a business had appointed a number of change managers, in different divisions, each subject matter experts from across the business. The people appointed didn’t necessarily have all the skills required, but the organisation brought in external support to bridge the gaps. Each business change manager was responsible for the benefits in their area and owned the business readiness for their area too. This was cited as an example of how ownership can be pushed back to here it should be.

“I inherited a project”, said an attendee, “where there was no visibility or clarity of revenue gain, compliance or cost savings. I got a list together and spent a day ranking priorities and highlighting things for which there was no capacity (or competence) to achieve. Isn’t that how you come up with a list and match available resource? Why hasn’t that been done beforehand?”

A piece of advice given was “Always keep that list open, never stifle the opportunity – but ensure people understand why things aren’t that important at a given time. That way you can get past the noise without forgetting about it all together and can rearticulate the most important things to do.”

## Measuring success

The room was asked: “Are you allowed to be a business architect? Not just analyst?” While a couple were, the majority said they were not. But it was discussed that these are vital roles to understanding an organisation’s overall vision and key in knowing what’s most important. Some told that this role is not often taken up – it can be threatening and heavily involved with workplace politics. “This is where agile helps”, told one guest, “but it’s always complex working with people.”

One person mentioned that a lot of theory was entering the conversation, and asked

**“In reality, is change going to be more about managing people, whilst project management takes a back seat?”**

...an interesting thought to end on, and a prominent theme throughout the evening.

Thanks to all our attendees and speakers. We hope you found the dinner and debate useful and look forward to inviting you to another Niche Talent event soon.