

Executive sponsorship

If the success of a risk management or GRC program is reliant on one thing, it's the executive support it needs to flourish. At first that support is required when somebody within the organization articulates the need to be more effective and/or more efficient in managing the ever-increasing levels of threats, vulnerabilities, and therefore risk in the organization. That first person may be taking a career risk suggesting that the organization should evolve, or do things differently than how they're done today. Face it, it's hard to get people to change if the processes they have today are working, even as painful as they may be. The old adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" rings loudly.

So how do we effect change in an organization if the natural reaction is reluctance to change? Change can only last if it is a priority from the top down, and that is why executive sponsorship is so central to the success of any program. A GRC program is no different, and in fact I would argue it's actually even more critical to have strong executive support, given the importance of effective risk management in most organizations today.

Sponsorship

The difference between a GRC program with and without a visible and vocal project sponsor is like night and day. Without a sponsor, the short-term priorities of the day take over and the big picture importance becomes less obvious because something else has taken center stage in the conversation. The executive sponsor needs to keep the topic on the table at most meetings, even if only to suggest that other parts of their mandate will be informed by this initiative.

Not to overstate the importance of strong (and visible) executive sponsorship, but it really does make the difference between a program that is effective and successful or not.

Here's the trick though: A sponsor is putting their career on the line to support the program, and the higher the perceived risk, the harder it will likely be to find a sponsor! If your organization is about to make a major pivot like implementing a risk management platform, define the goals that deliver value as quick wins and have a roadmap for additional value in subsequent steps. This approach of incremental risk and reward will help build confidence with the appropriate levels of sponsorship.



By **Kirk Hogan**
COO, Iceberg

khogan@icebergnetworks.com

The importance of regular updates (no surprises please!)

I reflected on this section for quite a while, and it dawned on me that I know zero executives who have told me, *“I love it when I’m caught off-guard by something and I can’t provide an answer.”* With all seriousness, keeping your sponsor apprised of status changes and approaching milestones will build confidence in each phase of your program. Sometimes the updates may be about less-than-desired outcomes, but don’t put off updating your sponsor. Inevitably, they will come to hear about the problem at some point, and your quick update cadence will gain their trust that they will get updates regardless of the good or bad news.

You will likely find that by having regularly scheduled updates, they can help unblock obstacles, or provide guidance on how to maneuver challenges. Remember, it is also in their best interest that you succeed.

Attribution to a core mandate

If your priority is not in line with what your executive is expected to deliver or execute, it should come as no surprise that you will get limited support, if any support at all. By ensuring that your conversations, updates and requests are demonstrably aligned with their priorities, you keep the topic on their mind, and more importantly, it becomes part of their daily conversations with other executives. Remember, as much clout as an executive might have, it makes their job so much easier if this initiative is easily attributable to their goals, so that its priority is never brought into doubt.

The core mandates are also the ones with business cases that exist, and with all likelihood have also been supported by an outside consultant who has provided independent verification that the case is sound and justified. This means that the only thing better than being attributed to a core mandate, is being attributed to more than one core mandate. Think of it as an insurance policy.

Do your research, keep your ears open, and find new reasons why your initiative is clearly going to help them achieve their objectives if they keep sponsoring your work. Business cases age: what was once critical may eventually become important; what was one important may become elective. Without the business case going through its own lifecycle of updates (which is common), these tidbits of relevance become critical to ongoing sponsorship.

Message development

Do yourself a favour: don’t expect that your executive sponsor will have the deep insight you have, or the time to do enough research to develop a compelling message. It is also true that different messages need to be developed for different audiences. Why leave this to chance? Take control and offer some “proposed messaging” and let your executive apply their personal style to your content. Once again, if you make it easy for them to see why they should support you, and you do the heavy lifting developing core content for messaging, they will connect your initiative to probable success.

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Check your facts, and check them again. There's nothing that will kill sponsorship like consistently wrong information. Facts and data can also be boring and un-compelling, so develop a story. This is the one thing I have found to be true in all successful initiatives. The story of how this initiative will generate success and further the organizational cause will compel people to listen, be interested, and support. Spend some time discussing what story will fit in with your executive sponsor's other messaging, and ideally you will be able to weave these stories together.

Supporting your sponsor

The reciprocal is also true. As much as you need the sponsorship of the executive, they also need to know that they can turn to you at any time during the program and get the support they need to keep the focus on your program. By this point of implementing your GRC program, your list of "Quick Wins" (see Chapter 6) should be supplying the executive with ongoing information and validation.

This works in two ways: First, the executive starts to rely on the program itself to get real-time updates, therefore giving them an ever increasing level of confidence that the program is delivering the value that was promised. Second, when the executive makes the GRC program part of their daily operations, it will undoubtedly become an embedded part of many conversations they have with other executive members.

This will have the effect of snowballing support for your program and the value it currently provides, but quite likely you'll find that other executives will start to theorize how your solution might enable their mandate also. What a powerful way to build support and momentum for your GRC initiative.

More in this series

Chapter 8 is "**Essential Components**". In previous chapters we've briefly discussed foundation components of a GRC program, but in our experience there are five absolutely essential components, either as features of the solution, or as activities to produce a working solution. More chapters from this series are available at icebergnetworks.com/risk-intelligence/

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