



GETTING SENIOR LEVEL BUY-IN AND SUPPORT: a guide



Briefing summary

- **Who:** For people setting up or running health care improvement projects in the NHS.
- **Why:** It is well-established that improvement projects with active sponsorship at executive director level are more likely to succeed.
- **What:** The briefing summarises the benefits that can be gained from involving executive directors in your work, together with insights from recipients of Health Foundation grants about how to achieve this.

Why involve executive directors in your work?

“When we were part of the Health Foundation’s Co-Creating Health programme, it was possible to identify those projects which had active executive sponsorship. It was clear that they were making more impact.”

Dr Peter Lachman, Deputy Medical Director for Safety, Great Ormond Street Hospital, and Health Foundation Quality Improvement Fellow

The Health Foundation requires recipients of improvement grants to demonstrate that their improvement work has an executive sponsor, because experience has shown this can be instrumental in success.

By involving an executive sponsor to back your project, you are better placed to:

- establish and sustain internal commitment and momentum
- address any internal barriers or resistance you may come across
- draw on skills and resources elsewhere in the organisation
- make connections with other senior decision makers.



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When to seek executive involvement?

You should aim to engage the interest and support of an executive sponsor as early as you can. In practical terms, this means approaching them as soon as you are able to communicate the potential benefits of the work, and when you have a sense of how it might relate to their agenda and objectives.

An executive director is also, arguably, more likely to support you if you approach them early on, as they can influence how the work develops. If you are considering applying to the Health Foundation for funding, you will need to demonstrate support from an executive director on your application form.

Who to involve?

Choosing which director to approach will depend on the nature of your project, and the extent to which it aligns with the objectives and interests of executive board members.

Dr Peter Lachman, who has extensive experience running improvement projects in the NHS, recommends approaching a Medical or Nursing Director and/or a Finance Director about the work in the first instance. He also advises that improvement projects receiving large grants – for example, £250k and more – need to consider how they might engage the full executive team in their work.

Factors to consider in seeking executive support

You are more likely to win executive support if you:

- are running a project that aligns with the organisation's broader strategy, or that helps to address a problem that is already of concern to senior management
- describe your project in terms that are relevant to the executive director in question, and highlight how the work will help them meet their own objectives
- seek their advice and adapt your approach accordingly.

You are more likely to sustain executive and senior level commitment and continued involvement if you:

- keep them informed about the project's development and progress
- enable the director to demonstrate how, by championing the project, they are contributing to the organisation's broader strategy
- continue to align the project with the strategic goals of the executive director and the organisation (extrinsic)
- demonstrate how it will help deliver his/her personal objectives for the year (intrinsic).



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What others say

Phil O'Connell is a former Health Foundation grant holder who now runs the international Simple Telehealth initiative, which uses telemedicine technology to support patients in managing their own health. He emphasises the importance of communicating about impact to engage the attention of executives:

“Link your project or idea to a problem that decision makers in the service are already trying to address, and couch your project in their language. Don't spend all your time communicating about the change you want to make, but focus instead on communicating the potential impact of that change and how it will help address their objectives.”

Ann Wagner is an executive director who oversees business development strategy at Airedale NHS Foundation Trust. She is an active champion of the Trust's work to improve end of life care through the use of telemedicine support. Based on her own experience, Ann encourages improvement leads to consider what executive directors might gain personally from getting involved in their project:

“I've been able to open doors for the team and help them unblock things internally, but it's been hugely beneficial for me too,” she says. “I've loved working with some very tenacious clinicians, and the project has brought me closer to frontline work. We all need to feel that what we do is landing somewhere. I'm very proud of the way we're changing care for people at the end of their lives.”

Resources

Further advice and evidence for sustaining and spreading improvement work

Spreading improvement ideas: Tips from empirical research, The Health Foundation, 2014.
www.health.org.uk/publication/spreading-improvement-ideas-tips-empirical-research

Using communications approaches to spread improvement, The Health Foundation, 2014.
www.health.org.uk/publication/using-communications-approaches-spread-improvement

Improvement leaders' guide to sustainability and spread, Modernisation Agency, 2002.
www.health.vic.gov.au/archive/archive2011/patientflow/downloads/2_3leadershipguide.pdf