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Many maintenance improvement efforts or "change initiatives" begin with good intentions. Senior leaders endorse the new program, "slap" the project leader on the back and say something along the lines of: "I'm here to support you. Let me know if you need anything." Regrettably, that's where leadership support often stops— *leaving the well-intentioned change initiative to die an untimely death* .

The question is then asked by senior leaders, "What happened to the maintenance improvement initiative?" Fingers begin pointing, the project leader ends up in the crosshairs, and the front line labels the initiative as just another "flavor of the month" by management. Sound familiar?

If change is not driven from above by senior management, it won't gain enough momentum to be successful. People within an organization need to understand that change is required and be given reasons why they need to change. They need to have knowledge and accept that processes need to now work differently. They need to agree that there will be real benefit(s) as a result. Unless these important messages come from senior leaders—*acting as "sponsors"*—p eople may resist or only partially adapt to change. What, though, is meant by the term "sponsor?"

In uncertain economic climates, success is not optional; there can be no false starts or flavors of the month.A project sponsor is usually the person who sees the need for change and has the authority to make something happen. In a large-scale change initiative, there can be different layers of sponsorship in the organization. The "primary" or executive sponsor is usually the one who has the power and status to create and deliver the project and frame and communicate a consistent message to the organization. For critical business change initiatives, the message should come from the very top. The chief executive should be engaged as the prime source of sponsorship.

A compelling business case is typically sufficient to enroll the support of many senior leaders willing to act as sponsors. Nearly all leaders want to be perceived as being supportive of exciting new ideas for improving organizational performance—*and they are under pressure to keep improving results* .
Unfortunately, many of them do not know how to act as a sponsor.

For an improvement initiative to be successful senior leaders must set examples from the highest levels within the organization. If they say one thing and then do another, people begin to doubt whether the organization is truly committed to the change initiative. Once a senior leader takes on the mantle of "sponsorship," he/she must set the example by communicating a non-wavering message, modeling the new behaviors and reinforcing the message through reward and recognition of the workforce.

In uncertain economic climates, success is not optional—*there can be no false starts or flavors of the month* . Make no mistake about it: Successful change programs can only be achieved when senior leaders provide visible sponsorship through the life of the effort. Without committed, skilled sponsorship, strategic initiatives will under-perform. The time, the cost and the pain of changing will be greater than necessary, and expected benefits will not be fully delivered.
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The opinions expressed in this Viewpoint section are those of the author, and don't necessarily reflect those of the staff and management of *Maintenance Technology* magazine.