

WHAT EXECUTIVE SPONSORS MUST DO IN THE AI ERA

How to Define, Govern, and Prove Sponsor Intent
to Improve Enterprise Transformation Program Outcomes
and Prepare for Agentic AI



DEFINE PURPOSE BEFORE COMMITMENTS

Shape the Transformation
Definition and Contracts



GOVERN PURPOSE THROUGH CHANGE

Preserve intent, guide
decisions, manage risk



PROVE OUTCOMES AS AI EXPANDS EXECUTION

Demonstrate value with
evidence that endures



As execution becomes more autonomous, leadership
must make **purpose** more explicit.

Executive Summary

Executive Sponsors remain accountable for the outcomes of Enterprise Transformation Programs while depending on others to design, implement, and operate the capabilities expected to produce them. Leadership expectations pass through business cases, scope decisions, contracts, requirements, designs, configurations, and operating practices. Each handoff can be reasonable on its own while the cumulative result moves away from what the Sponsor intended.

The transformation industry has spent decades strengthening implementation methods, program management, controls, testing, and reporting. Yet third-party studies continue to describe an unsatisfactory pattern of underdelivered outcomes, budget overruns, extended timelines, and unrealized value. Executive Sponsors who rely on the traditional playbook remain exposed to that pattern because stronger execution alone does not establish an authoritative definition of the purpose execution must serve.

The cycle often begins before implementation. Critical Sponsor Intent remains only partially defined when assumptions enter solution selection, estimates, SOW scope, and commercial commitments. As those assumptions move through successive decisions and handoffs, missing intent can emerge as rework, renegotiation, unplanned change orders, schedule disruption, and value erosion. Business Intent Design begins before consequential commitments are made so leadership can shape the Transformation Definition and what the organization agrees to buy.

Agentic AI raises the stakes. Organizations are preparing to delegate more analysis, recommendations, decisions, coordination, exception handling, and action to autonomous systems. Those systems require purpose, priorities, authority boundaries, accountabilities, validation requirements, and evidence expectations that are explicit enough to guide their behavior beyond the Executive Sponsor's direct presence.

This Executive Briefing defines what Executive Sponsors must do in response: establish authoritative Sponsor Intent before consequential commitments, govern it throughout the Enterprise Transformation Program lifecycle, control the expansion of delegated authority, validate continued alignment, and prove that intended outcomes are being achieved.

The Executive Sponsor owns that authoritative purpose. Business Intent, Scope Intent, and Transformation Approach Intent together form Sponsor Intent, the Executive Sponsor-owned expression of purpose and foundation of the Transformation Definition. The Sponsor develops it with Business-Side leaders, draws on expertise from providers and advisors, and retains authority over its business meaning. Sponsor Intent develops progressively, but the more that is made explicit before solution selection and contracting, the more effectively it can shape commitments and protect intended value.

The CFO Transformation Agent (The CFO-TA) is the Executive Sponsor Platform. It provides guidance, methodology, authoring, analysis, deliverable production, validation, review, coordination, decision support, continuity, and Sponsor Intent Lifecycle Management across the Enterprise Transformation Program lifecycle. It gives Executive Sponsors and their Business-Side teams leverage to define purpose early, preserve it through change, validate alignment, and prove whether intended outcomes were achieved.

The Leadership Challenge: Accountability Outlasts Direct Involvement

Executive Sponsors authorize investments, establish strategic direction, approve consequential commitments, accept business risk, and answer for outcomes. Program leaders coordinate delivery; functional and process leaders shape how the business operates; technology teams govern technical architecture; risk and compliance teams establish controls; and implementation partners design and deploy capabilities. The Sponsor depends on all of them while remaining accountable for the value their combined work is expected to create.

That arrangement creates distance between executive intent and operational execution. A leadership expectation becomes a business case, then a scope, a contract, requirements, designs, configurations, workflows, controls, and operating practices. Each translation introduces decisions about meaning, priority, tradeoffs, and acceptable change. Without an authoritative reference, participants must interpret what leadership intended.

An Enterprise Transformation Program can therefore deliver capable technology and satisfy contractual commitments while leaving the accountable Executive Sponsor dissatisfied with the result. The central leadership requirement is to preserve the connection between what the organization approves, what it buys, what it changes, and what it ultimately proves.

The Status Quo Demands a Different Approach

Organizations have made substantial advances in managing how transformation work is planned, controlled, tested, and delivered. Those disciplines remain essential. The persistent gap is the definition and governance of purpose: the intended outcomes, required Business-Side changes, governing priorities, decision boundaries, accountabilities, validation requirements, and evidence expectations that give execution its business meaning.

When those elements remain implicit, assumptions enter solution selection and contracting before the organization has established a sufficiently clear Transformation Definition. Implementation teams then encounter expectations that were never reflected in the original scope, estimates, or commitments. Addressing them later requires decisions under greater time, cost, and commercial pressure.

Executive Sponsors can break this cycle by establishing Sponsor Intent before consequential commitments are made and governing it throughout the Enterprise Transformation Program lifecycle. Earlier definition gives leadership more influence over solution selection, provider proposals, SOW scope, responsibilities, estimates, and the economic relationship between expected value and Total Cost of Ownership. Progressive refinement continues through implementation and operations, supported by decisions and evidence rather than repeated reconstruction of the original intent.

AI Makes Explicit Purpose More Important

Agentic AI expands the number, speed, and scale of decisions made beyond the Executive Sponsor's direct presence. Autonomous systems can analyze information, recommend actions, coordinate workflows, resolve exceptions, and act within delegated

authority. The value of that autonomy depends on whether leadership has defined what those systems are expected to achieve and the boundaries within which they may act.

Organizations have historically relied on experienced people to supply missing context. They interpreted incomplete guidance, reconciled competing priorities, recognized legitimate exceptions, and knew when to escalate. Agentic AI creates a practical need to make the relevant organizational intelligence explicit, accessible, authoritative, and current.

For consequential AI use cases, leadership must define intended outcomes, governing priorities, delegated authority, prohibited actions, exception rules, escalation conditions, human approval requirements, accountability, validation criteria, and evidence expectations. Historical data and documented workflows provide useful context, but Sponsor Intent supplies the authoritative direction for what the organization is trying to achieve.

The Executive Sponsor Owns Authoritative Purpose

The Executive Sponsor owns the authoritative definition of what the investment is intended to achieve and the value its capabilities are expected to deliver. That responsibility extends beyond approving a business case, attending steering committee meetings, resolving escalations, and authorizing go-live. It gives consequential decisions a durable business reference.

Capabilities are investments. Sponsor Intent is the governing definition of the value those investments are expected to deliver.

A capability is not intent. An agent, workflow, automation, or platform describes a potential means to an end, not the end itself.

Three responsibilities remain under Sponsor authority:

- **Business Intent** defines why the investment is being made and what leadership expects it to achieve.
- **Scope Intent** defines what must change, what must remain stable, what is included, what is excluded, and where the boundaries begin and end.

- **Transformation Approach Intent** defines how leadership expects the Enterprise Transformation Program to be conducted and the nature and magnitude of change the organization intends to pursue.

Together, these form Sponsor Intent, the Executive Sponsor-owned expression of purpose and foundation of the Transformation Definition. The Sponsor develops it with the Business-Side leaders who own affected outcomes, functions, processes, operations, and organizational changes. Implementation partners, software vendors, consultants, and advisors can facilitate the work and contribute expertise. The Executive Sponsor retains authority over the purpose, value, boundaries, priorities, and expected outcomes of the investment; that authority cannot be delegated to third parties.

Define Intended Value Before Selecting Capabilities

The strongest starting point for an Enterprise Transformation Program is the value leadership intends to create. The Executive Sponsor and Business-Side team define the intended Business Outcomes, required organizational changes, Conditions of Success, governing priorities, accountabilities, material assumptions, and evidence that will demonstrate achievement. Those definitions provide a basis for evaluating solutions and implementation approaches against expected value.

The governing sequence is:

Intended Value → Required Business Change → Enabling Capabilities → Total Cost of Ownership

This sequence protects the distinction between an investment and its purpose. When capabilities are selected before intended value and required change are sufficiently explicit, available features and provider methods can begin shaping the organization's definition of success. Business Intent Design gives leadership a stronger basis for deciding which capabilities to buy, which changes the business must make, and whether the expected value justifies the total investment.

Sponsor Intent is progressively defined through Sponsor Intent Assets. Initial assets are expected to be partial, then strengthened as Business-Side leaders contribute knowledge, assumptions are examined, decisions are made, and evidence develops. Greater completeness before solution selection and contracting gives Sponsor Intent

more influence over the Transformation Definition and reduces the likelihood that critical expectations first emerge as disruptive implementation changes.

Govern the Business-Side Change That Creates Value

Technology establishes capability. Business-Side change creates the path from capability to value. The Executive Sponsor must understand which decisions, processes, policies, operating practices, accountabilities, behaviors, and exception rules need to change for the investment to produce its intended outcome.

An AI forecasting capability illustrates the distinction. Technical accuracy can make better predictions available, but working-capital value depends on how planners use them, how inventory policies change, how procurement decisions respond, who owns exceptions, and whether operating teams act consistently on the resulting guidance. The Sponsor's responsibility is to govern the relationship between the delivered capability and the Business-Side change required to realize value.

That relationship should remain visible through solution selection, design, implementation, adoption, value realization, and operations. It gives leadership a way to distinguish capability delivery from the business outcome the investment was approved to create.

Govern Purpose and Behavior Together

Execution Governance governs behavior. It addresses whether people, providers, systems, workflows, controls, models, and agents operate as authorized. Intent Governance governs purpose. It provides the authoritative reference for determining whether that behavior continues to serve the outcomes and priorities established by the Executive Sponsor.

Intent Governance addresses both the enduring challenge of transformation drift and the emerging requirements of Agentic AI. It preserves authoritative Sponsor Intent as decisions, participants, assumptions, and operating conditions change. It also makes

intended outcomes, priorities, boundaries, accountabilities, validation requirements, and evidence expectations explicit enough to guide increasingly autonomous execution.

People compensated for ambiguity. Autonomous agents amplify it.

An implementation team can complete its milestones while the cumulative outcome moves away from the approved investment rationale. An agent can operate within its technical permissions while advancing a result leadership did not intend. Executive Sponsors need both forms of governance: one to assess authorized behavior and the other to preserve the purpose that behavior must serve.

Govern Delegated Authority Before Expanding Autonomy

Every consequential agentic use case requires a deliberate decision about authority. Leadership should establish the outcome an agent is expected to advance, the work it may perform, the information and tools it may access, the decisions it may make, and the thresholds that limit its authority. Exception handling, escalation, human authorization, accountability, evidence production, and validation must also be defined.

Autonomy can expand as evidence demonstrates that an agent operates within approved intent and boundaries. Evidence of unclear accountability, unreliable escalation, or misalignment should inform refinement before authority increases. This gives leadership a governed basis for extending autonomy rather than treating deployment as a one-time authorization.

Human governs the loop.

The principle does not require a person to review every routine action. It requires leadership to govern the purpose, authority, boundaries, accountability, validation, and evidence surrounding the decision loop.

Make Consequential Decisions Before They Become Expensive Commitments

Executive Sponsors have the greatest leverage while meaningful choices remain available. Sponsor Intent can shape solution-selection criteria, provider responsibilities, SOW commitments, transformation sequencing, Business-Side capacity, operating-model direction, data responsibilities, AI authority, validation requirements, and evidence obligations before those choices become embedded in contracts and designs.

Waiting until implementation to begin defining Sponsor Intent is too late to shape the original solution selection, estimates, contractual commitments, and SOW scope. Intent first discovered during implementation often requires design changes, replanning, rework, schedule adjustments, commercial negotiations, or unplanned change orders. The same expectation could have informed the original Transformation Definition and contract if leadership had made it explicit earlier.

A consequential recommendation should therefore identify the Sponsor Intent it advances, the assumptions and tradeoffs involved, its effects on expected value and Total Cost of Ownership, the evidence supporting it, and the authority required to decide. This gives the Executive Sponsor a decision-ready view of business meaning without requiring day-to-day management of implementation.

Govern ROI and Evidence Through Operations

Transformation ROI remains a Sponsor-owned outcome from the business case through operations. Every material capability should have a traceable relationship to its designed use, the required Business-Side change, the intended Business Outcome, the evidence of achievement, and the resulting economic value.

Capability → Designed Use → Required Business Change → Intended Business Outcome → Governed Evidence → Economic Value

Go-live makes capabilities available. Value realization continues as the organization adopts, operates, validates, and improves them. The business case should remain an

active governing reference so leadership can evaluate whether expected value is still credible, whether Total Cost of Ownership remains acceptable, and whether operational improvements are amplifying the value originally designed.

Evidence should be designed while leadership is defining the intended outcome.

Baselines, leading and lagging indicators, attribution or contribution logic, evidence ownership, validation activities, and the treatment of contradictory findings all influence whether an outcome can later be demonstrated credibly. Persistent evidence should be stored on the client's infrastructure and remain connected to the Sponsor Intent it is intended to validate.

Validate Alignment Before Declaring Confidence

Technical, integration, data, security, control, user-acceptance, and operational-readiness testing each answer important questions. The Executive Sponsor also needs to know whether the Enterprise Transformation Program remains capable of producing the value it was approved to create. Sponsor-level validation examines the relationship among designs, capabilities, required Business-Side changes, Conditions of Success, decision boundaries, accountabilities, operating conditions, and evidence.

Monitoring and improvement are continuous. Validation occurs through planned events using defined evidence. Sponsor Intent Testing provides the discipline for assessing alignment; the Sponsor Intent Validation Plan structures the planned validation activities; and Sponsor Intent Test Cases examine specific Sponsor Intent Assets, Conditions of Success, Decision Boundaries, Exception Rules, Accountability Requirements, and Evidence Requirements.

This discipline helps leadership distinguish capability delivery, technical performance, adoption, designed use, Business-Side change, outcome achievement, and economic value. Those conditions are connected, but they are not interchangeable. A positive delivery report can coexist with unresolved questions about whether the intended value is becoming real.

The Executive Sponsor Needs Leverage

The Executive Sponsor does not need to become the program manager, architect, process analyst, AI engineer, or implementation lead. The Sponsor needs a way to exercise authority over purpose across a system of people, providers, decisions, technologies, and operating conditions. That requires continuity beyond individual meetings, presentations, documents, and the Sponsor's direct presence.

The CFO-TA is the Executive Sponsor Platform. It supports Executive Sponsors and their Business-Side teams with guidance, methodology, authoring, analysis, deliverable production, validation, review, coordination, decision support, continuity, and Sponsor Intent Lifecycle Management throughout the Enterprise Transformation Program lifecycle. Business Intent Design and Intent Governance are hallmark disciplines operationalized through the platform.

The SILMS, the Sponsor Intent Lifecycle Management Studio, is a major platform capability used to establish, preserve, validate, monitor, improve, and prove Sponsor Intent. Governed Sponsor Intent Assets keep intended outcomes, required changes, rationale, decision boundaries, validation requirements, and evidence models accessible and traceable as participants and conditions change. The platform helps leadership maintain an authoritative reference from planning and sourcing through implementation, value realization, and operations.

AI can perform substantial authoring, analysis, synthesis, gap identification, refinement, decision preparation, validation support, traceability, and evidence-organization work. The Executive Sponsor retains authority over business meaning, consequential decisions, approvals, and expected outcomes. The result is greater Sponsor leverage without transferring Sponsor accountability.

Executive Sponsor Diagnostic

Executive Sponsors can assess their current foundation by asking:

- Where is the authoritative expression of Sponsor Intent for this investment?
- Does it cover Business Intent, Scope Intent, and Transformation Approach Intent?
- Have Business-Side leaders defined the changes required to produce intended value?
- Is Sponsor Intent explicit enough to shape solution selection, SOW scope, estimates, and commercial commitments?
- Can teams and providers evaluate consequential tradeoffs against the same authoritative purpose?
- Are governing priorities, decision boundaries, accountabilities, and exception rules clear?
- Have delegated AI authority and human-approval requirements been defined?
- Are validation requirements and evidence expectations established before outcomes are known?
- Can leadership trace delivered capabilities through Business-Side change to intended outcomes and economic value?
- Can the organization identify when Sponsor Intent changed, who authorized the change, and what evidence supported it?
- Will Sponsor Intent remain accessible and current through implementation, value realization, and operations?

Fragmented answers indicate where purpose still depends on interpretation. The answers also identify where greater definition, governance, validation, or continuity would strengthen the Executive Sponsor's position.

Executive Decisions

Executive Sponsors preparing for a consequential Enterprise Transformation Program should make five decisions early.

1. Establish Sponsor Intent as the authoritative expression of purpose.

Business cases, solution-selection criteria, contracts, requirements, designs, controls, validation activities, and value reporting should remain connected to the outcomes and boundaries leadership has authorized.

2. Begin Business Intent Design before consequential commitments.

The Executive Sponsor and Business-Side leaders should define as much Sponsor Intent as practical while it can still influence the Transformation Definition, provider proposals, SOW scope, estimates, responsibilities, and commercial terms. They should continue refining it as decisions and evidence develop.

3. Retain Sponsor authority while developing intent collaboratively.

Business-Side leaders contribute essential operational knowledge and own the changes required to create value. Providers and advisors can facilitate and contribute expertise. The Executive Sponsor retains authority over the investment's intended purpose and consequential business determinations.

4. Establish lifecycle governance and validation.

Sponsor Intent should remain referenceable, monitored, validated through planned events, improved as evidence develops, and connected to intended value through implementation and operations.

5. Define the purpose and boundaries governing Agentic AI.

Before autonomous authority expands, leadership should establish intended outcomes, delegated authority, decision boundaries, exceptions, escalation, accountability, validation requirements, and evidence expectations.

Closing Perspective

The AI Era expands what organizations can analyze, decide, coordinate, and execute. It also increases the importance of the purpose guiding those activities. Executive Sponsors can improve outcomes by making Sponsor Intent explicit before consequential commitments, preserving its authority through successive handoffs, validating alignment, and proving value through operations.

The central question every Executive Sponsor must answer is:

What does our organization use to preserve, validate, monitor, improve, and prove the outcomes I intend after the business case is approved?

Every major participant in an Enterprise Transformation Program has specialized tools and methods. The Executive Sponsor carries accountability for the intended outcome. The CFO-TA is the Executive Sponsor Platform designed to provide the leverage to exercise that accountability across the Enterprise Transformation Program lifecycle.

Request a Confidential Executive Sponsor Briefing

Evaluate whether your Enterprise Transformation Program has a governed definition of Sponsor Intent.

If your organization is preparing for, selecting, contracting, implementing, or operating a consequential Enterprise Transformation Program, Alentra Advisory can help your leadership team examine whether the Business Intent, Scope Intent, and Transformation Approach Intent governing the investment are sufficiently explicit, aligned, governable, and validatable.

A confidential Executive Sponsor Briefing can help you:

- Identify where intended outcomes and Business-Side changes remain implicit or open to interpretation.
- Assess whether Sponsor Intent is strong enough to shape solution selection, SOW scope, commercial commitments, and implementation decisions.
- Examine the connection among capabilities, required change, intended outcomes, Total Cost of Ownership, and expected value.
- Identify gaps in decision boundaries, accountability, validation requirements, and evidence expectations.
- Consider whether governing purpose is explicit enough to guide people, providers, workflows, automations, and increasingly autonomous agents.
- Understand how Business Intent Design, Intent Governance, The CFO-TA, and the SILMS can strengthen Executive Sponsor leverage and continuity.

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Tim Hourigan is an enterprise transformation advisor with more than 35 years of experience leading and supporting over 185 Enterprise Transformation Programs spanning ERP, CRM, analytics, data, AI-enabled operations, and business process modernization. His work focuses on helping accountable Executive Sponsors define the value they intend, govern the purpose behind consequential investments, and maintain influence beyond their direct presence.

Tim originated Business Intent Design and created The CFO-TA, the Executive Sponsor Platform. Through guidance, methodology, authoring, analysis, deliverable production, validation, review, coordination, decision support, continuity, and Sponsor Intent Lifecycle Management, the platform helps Executive Sponsors and Business-Side teams establish, preserve, validate, monitor, improve, and prove Sponsor Intent across the Enterprise Transformation Program lifecycle.

Document Version 1.0