

The Secret Sauce to Leadership Buy-In:

From Project Failure to Project FOMO

The Challenge

Projects fall down all the time. While there are many reasons for failure, one of the most common is a lack of leadership buy-in.

Executives may lose interest over time or may never have fully understood the project's purpose in the first place. Project leaders may struggle to communicate effectively with senior leadership, speaking in operational detail when executives need the headlines (and fast)! In aged care, projects are constantly competing for attention and momentum. Often people and resources get diverted to more urgent things, never to return. Sound familiar?

Without active sponsorship from leadership, even the best or most straightforward projects can struggle to survive.

The Opportunity

The good news is that leadership buy-in is not all luck, it can be deliberately built and maintained.

When done well, executive support becomes the secret sauce that keeps the project momentum going and elevates a project from a temporary initiative to something embedded in business-as-usual. The ultimate goal is not simply to complete a project but to create sustainable organisational impact. To achieve that, project teams need leaders who understand, support, advocate for, and invest in the project's success.

That's why ARIA's programs, like our Flagship Projects, Innovation Capability Program and LIFT Leadership Program, all emphasise Project Sponsorship by a senior leader as a key element of success.

Here, we capture the secret sauce of leadership buy-in, taking on-the-ground advice from one Project Lead in our Flagship Projects who knew the importance of senior sponsorship from the beginning...

The Approach

1. Start with Strategic Alignment

Leadership engagement begins with relevance.

Executives are responsible for delivering organisational strategy, managing risk, and achieving performance outcomes. More often than not, executives have Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) to report against on a regular basis, and these are prioritised. If a project cannot clearly demonstrate how it contributes to these priorities on an organisational and personal leadership level, it will always struggle for attention.

Successful projects consistently connect project objectives to the broader business. Leaders need to easily see why the project matters and what value it will create.

*“What is the **business** saying?”*

The first module of ARIIA's LIFT Leadership Program, *How does organisational context and culture influence innovation?*, explores this in more detail.

2. Engage Early and Leave Breadcrumbs

One of the biggest mistakes project teams make is waiting for major milestones to engage leaders.

Successful projects leave "breadcrumbs" along the way; small, regular updates that keep leaders informed and invested. These updates might include early wins, positive participant feedback, key learnings, data insights, or emerging opportunities.

Breadcrumbs help maintain visibility and prevent leaders from feeling disconnected from the project's progress.

“Already I'm talking to other areas of the business and everyone's talking about the ARIIA project. We're building that up, prior to even starting the project!”

3. Position the Project Lead at the Right Level

Project Leads play a critical role as translators between the executive level and frontline teams.

To be effective, they need sufficient access and credibility across all levels of the organisation. They must understand executive priorities while also maintaining strong relationships with the people delivering the work on the ground.

The most successful Project Leads navigate both worlds, building trust from the boardroom to the frontline.

“As part of the communications plan, I've ensured that the people involved in the pilot are aware, that their managers are aware, and that their managers are aware. They're all getting updates and I've filtered that in all the way along. I want them to feel as if they're all on this journey.”

4. Ensure Sponsors Have Skin in the Game

Executive sponsorship should be more than a name on a governance chart.

Sponsors who actively contribute to decision-making, champion project outcomes, and publicly advocate for success are far more likely to drive meaningful change. When sponsors have personal accountability and a genuine stake in the outcome, their commitment remains strong even when competing priorities emerge.

5. Create a Culture of Experimentation

Leaders are often more willing to support initiatives that are framed as opportunities to learn rather than promises of perfection.

Positioning a project as an experiment or pilot creates space for innovation, adaptation, and continuous improvement. Bringing leaders into this mindset from the beginning helps establish a shared understanding that learning and refinement are valuable outcomes, not signs of failure.

ARIIA's LIFT Leadership Program further explores how building a culture of experimentation is essential to implementing change.

The Secret Ingredient: Promotion Matters

A common misconception is that a good project will speak for itself.

In reality, promoting the project internally is just as important as designing and delivering the project.

"We are shouting from the hilltops because we're all super engaged and passionate about what we're doing! We can see the impact."

Project teams must actively communicate successes, celebrate wins, share stories, and demonstrate impact. Leadership buy-in is built through visibility and engagement, not simply through status updates.

The best projects create momentum that extends beyond their immediate stakeholders.

"It's not just about the people involved in the project, it extends beyond."

The fourth module of our LIFT Leadership Program, *How do I bring others on the journey of change?* explores this in more detail.

The Outcome: Creating FOMO

You know things are going well when leaders from other departments start paying attention! You want to hear: *“When is it our turn?”* FOMO - the Fear of Missing Out.

This is where buy-in transforms into organisational demand. When leaders across the organisation want to be associated with the project, support becomes easier to secure, resources become easier to access, the impact is broader, and the likelihood of integrating into business-as-usual is more secure.

Key Lesson

Projects do not succeed on technical excellence alone.

Successful projects are strategically aligned, consistently visible, actively sponsored, and involve significant internal promotion across the organisation. By building strong relationships at different levels of the organisation and communicating the value of the project in a language that resonates with the different audiences in the organisation – Project Leads can turn leadership buy-in from a project risk into a powerful accelerator for implementing change.

Please contact Feros Care via feroslearn@feroscare.com.au for further information.