

Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme



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1.0 Introduction and Background

The healthcare landscape is constantly evolving. Advancements in technology, policy changes, and shifting societal needs and expectations are changing the health care women seek. Effective midwifery leadership is critical to meet these challenges, and involves fostering a responsive, supportive, and respectful environment that champions sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, and adolescent health (SRMNAH) and meets the needs of women, gender diverse people, and newborns.

Midwife leaders are fundamental to ending preventable maternal and newborn mortality, morbidity, and stillbirths (1). Midwifery leaders advance the profession by advocating for and supporting the development of a midwifery workforce that is educated, regulated, and enabled (2). Leadership development opportunities, effective sponsorship relationships and support from healthcare executives (3) equips midwife leaders with the knowledge, capability, and capacity to contribute to building health systems that provide effective SRMNAH services. The Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme is part of the essential solution for developing and progressing the midwife leaders needed to do this work.



Over the past decade, the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) has facilitated leadership development programmes for young and emerging midwife leaders in low- and middle-income countries. The Young Midwife Leader (YML) Programme recruited participants under the age of 35, through an open, online expression of interest. Alongside selected YMLs, executive midwife leaders (EMLs) were recruited from aligned midwives' associations (MAs) to participate in the programme.

The YML and EML Programmes enabled 45 young midwife leaders and five executive midwife leaders to undertake a bespoke two-year, part-time, hybrid midwifery leadership programme. The programme enabled participants to enhance their skills in leadership, management, and resource mobilisation. Leadership competencies were developed through formal and informal education and development opportunities.

The programme was a success, with demonstrable benefits to midwifery leadership, both for the YML and the EML participants. Insights and evaluations from this programme have inspired the Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme.



ICM recommends that all MAs, health system leaders and other organisations where midwife leaders work consider participating in the Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme.

2.0 What is the Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme?

The Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme supports current and emerging midwife leaders and offers numerous benefits to all participants, and the midwifery profession. It will provide current and aspiring leaders with valuable guidance and opportunities for growth, whilst providing reciprocal learning, development, and networking opportunities.

The Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme is a 24-month programme, during which executive sponsors (**sponsors**) are matched with existing or emerging midwife leaders (**sponsees**). The sponsor acts voluntarily and meets with the sponsee at least bi-monthly (e.g. once in two months) for two years. During the two-year programme, ICM will arrange two check in meetings per year with each sponsor, and host a final, end-of-programme meeting with all participants.



An executive sponsor (sponsor) is a senior leader at executive or ministerial level or equivalent, who leads, or is in charge of an organisation, business, region, or country.

A sponsee is an early career midwife leader, or a leader who aims to become a senior midwife leader, and is currently in an informal, or formal leadership role.

3.0 What is an Executive Sponsor?

In healthcare systems, the role of an executive sponsor has gained increasing attention, as organisations strive to develop leadership, foster a culture of mentorship, and drive successful change initiatives. However, the literature presents varying definitions and interpretations of what constitutes an executive sponsor, particularly concerning their responsibilities and impact on sponsees.



The term “executive sponsor” is often used interchangeably with other roles, such as mentor, advocate, and leader, leading to some ambiguity in its definition. Generally, an executive sponsor is a senior leader within an organisation who supports a particular project, initiative, or individual by providing strategic guidance, resources, and visibility (4). Here the role can encompass championing projects and initiatives requiring cross-functional collaboration and top-level management support (5, 6). Their role often involves navigating complex organisational structures, advocating for necessary resources, and aligning project goals with organisational strategy. It can also encompass mentoring, coaching, and advocating for more junior staff members, facilitating their career growth and professional development, actively promoting their personal and professional growth, providing access to opportunities at work and advocating for career advancement.

So, in some contexts an executive sponsor is primarily a leader who facilitates change by leveraging their influence, authority, and networks (7). In others, there may be emphasis on the role of the executive sponsor as a mentor and coach, particularly in the healthcare setting, where the complexity of operations and the high-stakes nature of patient care require strong leadership to develop future leaders (8). The definition of an executive sponsor, therefore, seems to encompass a spectrum of roles, from strategic leader to personal mentor.



In the context of the Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme, an executive sponsor is described as a *senior leader at executive level or equivalent, ministerial level or equivalent, who leads, or is in charge of an organisation, a business or a country, who actively promotes growth, provides access to opportunities at work, and advocates for career advancement for emerging leaders.*

4.0 Executive Sponsorship in Healthcare

While the literature about executive sponsorship in healthcare provides valuable insights, several gaps and limitations exist. First, much of the existing research focuses on the benefits of sponsorship for sponsees, with less emphasis on the advantages for the sponsors themselves. This imbalance may limit a comprehensive understanding of the reciprocal nature of the sponsorship relationship.

Furthermore, the literature tends to idealise the role of the executive sponsor without adequately addressing the challenges and potential drawbacks. For example, executive sponsors’ time and resource constraints, particularly in high-pressure ministerial, healthcare, education, or regulatory environments, are not thoroughly explored. This oversight can lead to an overly optimistic view of the role, which may not fully account for the practical realities that executive sponsors may encounter (5).

Another limitation is the lack of empirical studies specifically focused on executive sponsorship in the healthcare context. While there is substantial research on mentorship and leadership within healthcare, fewer studies explicitly examine the unique aspects of executive sponsorship and its impact on both sponsors and sponsees.



5.0 Benefits to the Executive Sponsor

While much of the literature focuses on the benefits of sponsorship for sponsees, there is also a growing recognition of the advantages to the sponsor. Significant benefits for executive sponsors include:

- ✱ Enhancing the sponsor's leadership skills.
- ✱ Developing competencies such as empathy, coaching, and communication, which are essential for effective leadership (9).
- ✱ Learning to navigate the complexities of balancing support, with allowing autonomy, which can lead to refined leadership practices and strategies.
- ✱ Gaining insights into the emerging talent within their organisation, providing them with a clearer understanding of the next generation of leaders and their unique challenges (10). This knowledge can be valuable for succession planning, as sponsors are better positioned to identify high-potential individuals who can be shaped for future leadership roles.
- ✱ Cultivating a diverse pipeline of talent, ensuring that their organisation/ health system remains competitive and capable of adapting to changing healthcare landscapes.
- ✱ Enhancing the reputation and visibility of the executive sponsor within the organisation/ health system / ministry.
- ✱ Being seen as champions for talent development, allowing executive sponsors to build credibility and trust among their peers and juniors. This can lead to increased influence and opportunities for the sponsor, as they are perceived as leaders who invest in the growth and success of others.
- ✱ Creating reciprocal relationships, with sponsees, bringing fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to inform the sponsor's strategic thinking and decision-making (11).

6.0 Benefits to Sponsees

An executive sponsorship programme can be a powerful tool for developing midwife leaders (sponsees). By providing mentorship, guidance, and opportunities for growth, such a programme can help sponsees reach their full potential while contributing to long term success of a health system, health centre in providing quality SRMNAH services, but also to midwives advancing the profession in areas like research, policy, or professional associations.

The contribution of executive sponsors to developing sponsees should not be underestimated. It involves more than just providing guidance or mentorship, and includes actively advocating for the sponsee's advancement, giving access to networks, and creating opportunities for visibility. The relationship is dynamic and flexible; opportunities and support can be achieved in numerous ways, such as shadowing, observational opportunities, coaching, mentorship, networking, and project involvement.

In healthcare settings, where the hierarchical structure and specialised knowledge domains can create barriers to career progression, the role of an executive sponsor is particularly valuable. For instance, executive sponsors can help sponsees navigate the complexities of healthcare organisations by providing insights into the unwritten rules, organisational politics, and cultural nuances that are often crucial for career advancement but are not formally taught (12). This guidance can be instrumental in helping sponsees build the necessary competencies and confidence to take on leadership roles.

Executive sponsorship is also linked to improved job satisfaction, retention, and career progression among sponsees (13). Through sponsorship, sponsees can gain access to new projects, leadership roles, and professional development opportunities that they might not have had. Sponsors who are invested in the success of sponsees can also enhance the sponsee's visibility, enabling them to demonstrate their skills and potential to a broader audience (11).



6.1 Summary of Key Benefits



Mentorship and Guidance:

Sponsors can provide valuable advice, feedback, and guidance to help sponsees navigate their career paths and overcome challenges.



Networking and Visibility: Gaining access to the sponsors' networks can open doors to new opportunities, collaborations, and professional connections. Additionally, being sponsored by a senior executive can increase visibility, enhancing the sponsee's reputation and credibility as emerging leaders.



Career Advancement Opportunities:

Through sponsorship, executives can advocate for participants' career advancement within an organisation. This may include encouraging them to apply for leadership roles, express engage in additional education and development opportunities.



Skill Development: Sponsors can provide valuable developmental opportunities for sponsees, such as stretch assignments, recommending a leadership course, or exposure to different aspects of healthcare. These help participants develop the skills and competencies needed to excel in leadership roles.



Succession Planning: Executive sponsorship programmes can contribute to an organisation's succession planning efforts by identifying and developing high-potential leaders for future leadership positions. By investing in the development of emerging leaders, organisations can ensure a pipeline of talent to fill critical roles as they become available.

7.0 Components of the Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme

- **Selection Process**
- **Matching Participants with Sponsors**
- **Goal Setting and Development Planning**
- **Regular Check-Ins and Feedback**
- **Networking and Exposure**
- **Evaluation and Continuous Improvement**

7.1 Selection of Executive Sponsors

A successful executive sponsorship programme relies on selecting the right executives to participate. An executive sponsor should typically be at an executive level, equivalent to, or above. They should have experience of acting as an executive sponsor and or mentor where they have supported the improvement and success of others:

- ✱ The choice of executive sponsor will be based on interest, personality, leadership skills, knowledge, availability, and professional fit.
- ✱ The sponsor must be of a senior enough position to command the attention of those more senior and the respect of those more junior.
- ✱ Ideally, the sponsor should be someone who understands the midwifery profession, believes in it, can effectively champion midwives and accelerate their development and success.
- ✱ Participants on the programme are typically selected based on their leadership, performance, and readiness for participation. This may involve nominations from managers, self-nominations, or a formal application process. In the case of this programme, we are seeking self-nominations.

7.2 Matching Participants with Sponsors

Each participant is matched with a senior executive sponsor who serves as their mentor and advocate throughout the programme. When making these matches, factors such as the participant's career goals, interests, and areas for development are considered.

During partnership allocation, consideration will be given to cultural compatibility, executive style, location, existing relationship, pertinent expertise, knowledge of midwifery, experience with similar individuals, and any other standard linkage between the midwife sponsee and the executive sponsor. Where the executive sponsor and sponsee already have an existing relationship or the sponsee has identified a specific executive sponsor with

whom they would like to partner during the programme, we will aim to support this.

To avoid relationships becoming superficial and transactional, both parties need to be invested in the programme and willing and open to reciprocal development. Establishing an effective relationship and outlining the programme's expectations for both parties at the commencement of the programme will be vital to the ongoing success of the relationship for both sides. Relational authenticity is a two-way process in which both parties share their perspectives and are open to hearing and learning from each other. Sponsees get the support and validation they need to take on new challenges, and sponsors understand their sponsee's capabilities and talents.

7.3 Goal Setting and Development Planning

Sponsees work with their sponsors to set goals and create a development plan outlining the steps needed to achieve them. This may include identifying specific skills to develop projects or identifying which experiences to seek out. The development plan's output will determine the success of the Executive Sponsorship Programme.



7.4 Regular Check-Ins and Feedback

Sponsors and sponsees meet regularly (at least once every two months) to discuss progress, provide feedback, and adjust development plans as needed. These check-ins allow participants to seek guidance and advice from their sponsors and ensure they stay on track toward their goals.

During the two-year programme, ICM will arrange two check in meetings per year with each sponsor, and host a final, end-of-programme meeting with all participants.

7.5 Networking and Exposure

Sponsors facilitate networking opportunities for sponsees within organisations, including introductions to other senior leaders, participation in leadership events, and involvement in high-visibility projects.



7.6 Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

The programme will be periodically evaluated to assess its effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Feedback from sponsors and sponsees will be gathered to inform programme enhancements and ensure it remains aligned with ICM's leadership development plans. The process, impact and outcome of the sponsees' development plans will form part of the evaluation.



8.0 Summary

The maternity care landscape is in a state of ongoing transformation. Midwife leaders play a crucial role in building a responsive, inclusive, and forward-thinking approach to the midwife's role in meeting SRMNAH needs.

Midwife leaders must be adaptable and capable of guiding their teams through these changes, ensuring that their organisations and the profession of midwifery, remains responsive and innovative.

The Midwife Leaders Executive Sponsorship Programme is crucial in developing and sustaining formal midwife leadership positions and has the potential to, strengthen the institutional capacity for midwives, assist them to drive the advancement of health policy, and equip them to contribute to maternity care reform. We look forward to welcoming sponsors and sponsees to this programme and advancing our network, so that all midwives have an opportunity to develop and grow as leaders.



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