

Gartner Research

Selecting Employee Resource Group Executive Sponsors

Human Resources Research Team

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Selecting ERG Executive Sponsors

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FOUNDATIONAL This research is reviewed periodically for accuracy.

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Whether your organization is selecting executive sponsors for the first time or reselecting executive sponsors for specific ERGs, this tool can help you answer the critical questions around ERG executive sponsor selection.

Overview

How Do CDOs Select ERG Executive Sponsors?

When an organization establishes employee resource groups (ERGs) or when ERG leadership transitions occur, chief diversity officers (CDOs) are tasked with connecting senior leaders to ERGs as executive sponsors. These executive sponsors support the ERGs as they execute their strategic objectives.

However, CDOs often face the challenge of determining which leaders to select for the ERG executive sponsor roles. Whether your organization is selecting executive sponsors for the first time or reselecting executive sponsors for specific ERGs, you must ask yourself a few critical questions to create a successful executive sponsor program. We partnered with your peers to answer those critical questions.

1. Should an ERG executive sponsor be chosen or volunteer?
2. What should CDOs look for when selecting an ERG executive sponsor?
3. What are the ERG executive sponsor's responsibilities and expectations?

Should an ERG Executive Sponsor Be Chosen or Volunteer?

Most organizations are comfortable with a variety of ERG executive sponsor selection methods, depending on the structure and needs of their organization.

Because executive support is needed to champion ERGs at the highest possible level of the organization, executive sponsors are crucial. CDOs must ensure that at least one senior leader is willing to assume the role of executive sponsor for each ERG.

Most organizations are comfortable with executive sponsors volunteering for the role, being identified by ERG leaders, being selected by the Executive D&I Council, or being identified by the

CDO. However, final approval is usually given by the CDO or an HR staff member, as these leaders will be key D&I representatives for the D&I mission.

To determine what works best for your organization, ask yourself:

- How involved is the executive leadership team in D&I initiatives?
- How often have executives asked to participate as an executive sponsor in the past?
- How many executives participate in other D&I efforts such as the Executive D&I Council?
- How many executives are expressing interest in executive sponsorship as a way to learn more about D&I efforts?

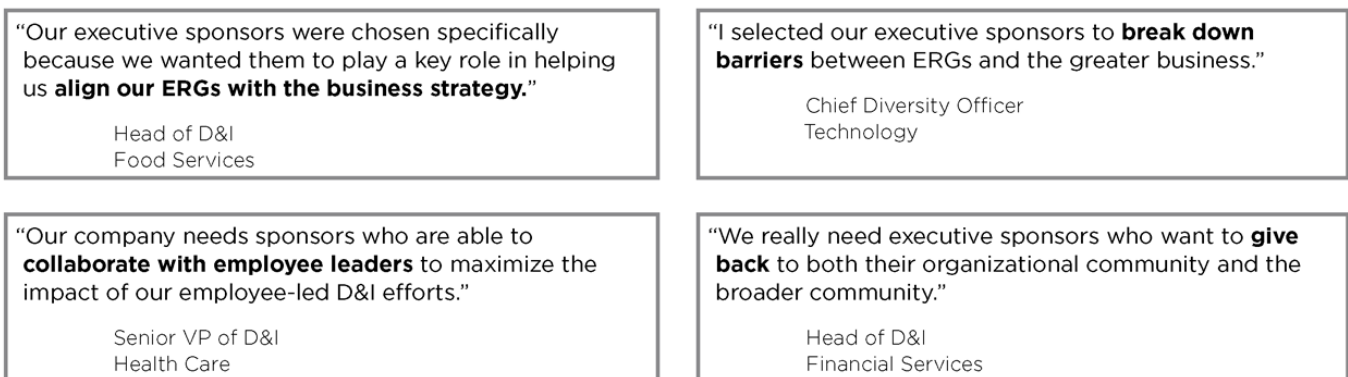
What Should CDOs Look for When Selecting an ERG Executive Sponsor?

There is no single type of leader that best fits the ERG executive sponsor role; however, the CDO should invite the leaders best aligned with the needs of each ERG.

When asked what they look for in an ERG executive sponsor, CDOs give a variety of answers.

Figure 1: Choosing an Executive Sponsor

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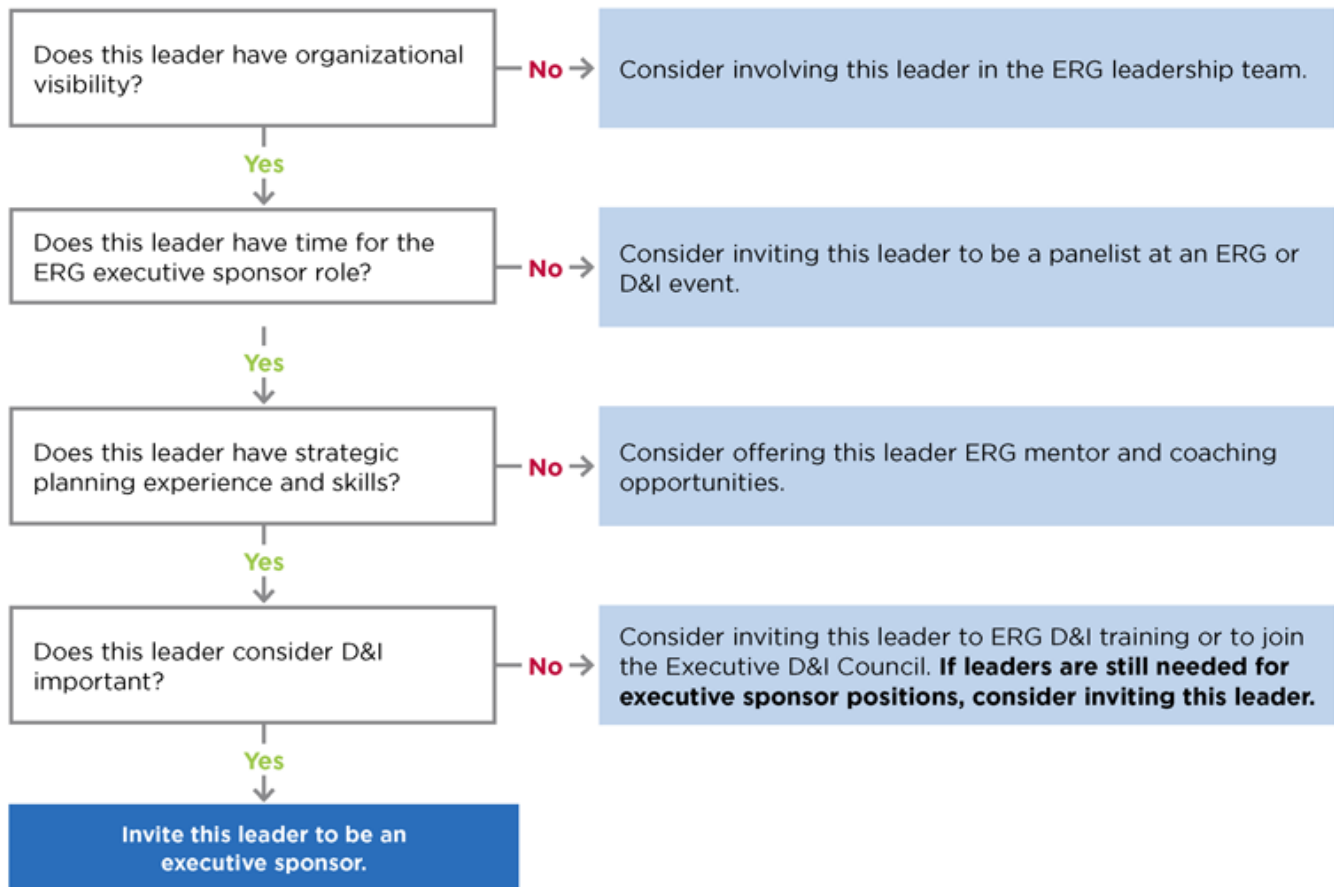
Source: CEB analysis.

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However, CDOs should consider a few key questions before inviting a potential leader to join the ERG leadership team as an executive sponsor. If a leader is not a good fit for the role of executive sponsor, there are many other ways they can expand their knowledge of diversity and support ERGs.

Figure 2: Selecting ERG Executive Sponsors Flow Chart

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Source: CEB analysis.

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When vetting potential executive sponsors, CDOs should also consider these skills and experiences:

- Does this leader have cross-cultural leadership experience?
- Is this leader in a different functional area than the ERG chair and co-chair?
- Has this leader had cultural competency or leadership training?
- Does this leader have coaching or mentoring experience?
- Does this leader have experience increasing market share, engaging employees, or improving talent outcomes?

What Are the ERG Executive Sponsor's Responsibilities and Expectations?

ERG executive sponsors must be community champions, strategic partners, and network leaders.

Once a leader is appropriately vetted as a potential executive sponsor, ERG leaders and the CDO work together to determine if the potential sponsor is able to represent the ERG to the workforce, workplace, and marketplace. ERG executive sponsors should be:

- **Community Champions:** Executive sponsors provide ERG visibility and a direct line of communication to senior leaders within the organization.
- **Strategic Partners:** Executive sponsors give strategic direction to help align the ERG mission with the business strategy.
- **Network Leaders:** Executive sponsors connect the ERG leadership team to a larger network of leaders, managers, and advocates inside and outside the organization.

A full description of each role can found in figure 3.

Figure 3: Three Roles of an ERG Executive Sponsor

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Community Champion	Strategic Partner	Network Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supports the group through leadership communication and visibility ▪ Maintains awareness of historical context and current key issues relating to ERG community ▪ Champions the ERG and its objectives in budget discussions, D&I Executive Councils, leadership meetings, and town halls to increase and enhance the ERG's profile and reputation ▪ Participates in ERG events and identifies opportunities to participate in other D&I efforts ▪ Represents the ERG externally in community outreach and external communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gives strategic direction to align the ERG mission with the organization's business strategy ▪ Helps identify measurable objectives that support business or talent goals ▪ Holds regular meetings and feedback discussions with the ERG leadership team ▪ Ensures ERG processes and activities align with other related company policies and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Connects ERG leadership to a broad network of relationships ▪ Helps to actively identify and overcome obstacles and resistance within the organization ▪ Escalates key issues, challenges, and blockers to the appropriate level of management ▪ Provides ERG leadership performance feedback to the ERG leaders' managers ▪ Connects the ERG with relevant business activities for collaboration

Source: CEB analysis.

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Once the primary responsibilities of executive sponsorship have been communicated to a leader, CDOs should share what is and isn't expected of the new sponsor.

Some tips for setting ERG executive sponsor expectations are included in figure 4.

Figure 4: ERG Executive Sponsor Expectations

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Expected	Not Expected
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assist ERG leaders with strategic planning. ▪ Help ERG leaders make connections with speakers and senior leaders. ▪ Advocate for the ERG's talent segment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Must be a part of the diverse talent segment group. ▪ Must attend all ERG events. ▪ Must lead the ERG.

Source: CEB analysis.

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After setting the expectations, CDOs should share other executive sponsors' best practices and how they supported their ERGs. Use the following examples as well as those from your own organization to begin engaging your executive sponsor with the ERG community.

- **Clearly define the executive sponsor's responsibilities.** Entering a new role without guidance impedes an executive sponsor's ability to support the ERG. When the CDO outlines a sponsor's full responsibilities and provides appropriate onboarding, the sponsor better supports their ERG community. Use our [Executive Sponsorship Sample Job Description](#) to create your own executive sponsor job description.
- **Determine the length of the executive sponsor's term.** When a CDO chooses an executive sponsor, the term length is also typically defined. This executive sponsor's term is often the same length as the ERG leader's term; the two should overlap to maintain a strong leadership team. Volunteer executive sponsors typically don't serve a defined term, but organizations that operate with volunteers should consider specifying a term length to prevent executive sponsor burn out.
- **Leverage your executive sponsor's functional expertise.** Executive sponsors come from a variety of business units or corporate functions and often have a different perspective and experience than ERG leaders. CDOs can encourage ERG leaders to use their executive sponsor's business insight to better inform their strategic decisions. View the interview [EBRG Executive Sponsor Spotlight](#) with Tom Morse from Sodexo to learn more.
- **Use executive sponsors to engage middle managers in ERG successes.** Middle managers often don't understand the benefit of their employees attending ERG events or participating in ERG leadership. As a senior leader, the executive sponsor, can communicate the ERG's employee value to middle managers. To more effectively communicate with line managers, use the [Sample Executive Sponsor E-mail to ERG Leader's Managers](#).

What Next Steps Should Be Taken After Selecting the ERG Executive Sponsor?

The CDO must take a few additional steps after ERG executive sponsors have been selected to ensure each one is successful.

- **Onboard the new executive sponsor.** Use our tool, [A CDO's Guide to Onboarding ERG Executive Sponsors](#), to learn more about onboarding executive sponsors and other organizations' best practices.
- **Introduce the executive sponsor to ERG leaders.** From there, the ERG leaders will provide the ERG executive sponsor with specific knowledge and community priorities. CDOs can provide their ERG leaders with our ERG resource, [An ERG Leader's Guide to Onboarding Executive Sponsors](#).
- **Set up regular cadence of meetings:** To ensure executive sponsors are supporting their ERGs as well as benefiting from their new opportunity, CDOs should meet with them regularly. Some organizations meet quarterly with executive sponsors while others only meet once a year. CDOs should consider setting up quarterly meetings with all executive sponsors to share best practices and successes; these meeting may be more frequent as changes or events dictate.

Figure 5: Check in with Executive Sponsors Regularly

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Whether it's a simple e-mail update once a month, a quick virtual call every few months, or a face-to-face meeting once a quarter, consistently checking in with your executive sponsors will ensure they have the information they need to successfully support their ERG. Either have an agreed-on schedule (e.g., once a week, biweekly), or check in when you experience important events or changes.

Additional Check-Ins Are Needed:

- During organizational change
 - Example: Organization acquired by another company
- During transition of ERG leadership
 - Example: When ERG chair or co-chair leaves the organization
- When ERG executive sponsor transitions out of role
 - Example: When another executive is taking over role
- When there is an environmental, political, social challenge related to ERG talent segment
 - Example: Hate crime against a specific diverse talent segment

Source: CEB analysis.

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Conclusion

As an executive sponsor, leaders can begin their role as a D&I community champion, strategic partner, and network leader. Once a CDO determines if a potential ERG executive sponsor is an appropriate fit for the role and is willing to fulfill the responsibilities and expectations of the position, the leader can officially be placed as an executive sponsor.

About This Research

We surveyed and interviewed over 50 CDOs and ERG leaders for a comprehensive analysis of the steps a head of D&I should take to select ERG executive sponsors.

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