Cynthia Ridley heads the Innovation & Change Leadership Practice for Kalypso, a fast-growing innovation and PLM (Product Lifecycle Management) consulting firm. With more than 20 years experience in engineering, operations, and executive coaching, Ridley specializes in executive team alignment, leadership development, and change management for PLM and new product development initiatives.

To understand some of the challenges around executive leadership with large-scale PLM initiatives, PTC’s Rob Leavitt asked Ridley about lessons learned from her work on PLM programs with a wide range of consumer goods, finance, and technology firms. Here’s what she had to say:

Leavitt: The importance of executive sponsorship for PLM is hardly a new or ignored topic. Why is it still so difficult for companies to get this right?

Ridley: Everyone knows that executive sponsorship is important. But simple sponsorship is not enough to ensure a successful program with real business impact. The real challenge is having executive advocates that are passionate about the initiative being successful, that constantly share their vision, and that make it important to their direct reports. It’s actually rare to have this kind of executive advocacy.

More often I see executives that approve the budget and think the program is a good idea, but they also think it is someone else’s responsibility to make it happen. They delegate their advocacy to someone lower level and it doesn’t work. Or they don’t deal with resistance from peers or others in upper management. And they don’t hold people accountable for actually delivering against interim milestones.
Leavitt: Is it simply a matter of time? Do executive sponsors simply need to spend more time lobbying and monitoring and demanding accountability for results?

Ridley: Time is certainly an issue but they also need to know how to be an effective advocate. One thing that is seldom addressed in planning, for example, is building alignment at the senior management and executive levels. How can you influence the right people to ensure their advocacy, too? This speaks to politics, power, and control across the organization—the things that usually matter most but are typically not included in project plans.

If you’re the advocate, you need to connect the dots for other executives and make the program relevant at the strategic level. You need to create a vision for PLM that is connected to business strategy and provides a reason for other executives to support the investment. This effort is often short cut and you end up without real alignment. Without that alignment and that buy-in at the executive level, it’s much harder for programs like PLM that cut across different silos to succeed.

Leavitt: But it takes more than just the vision, right?

Ridley: The vision is just the beginning. You also need to understand how to bring the organization through a major change which usually requires a continual effort to win advocates throughout the organization and address the resistance that is always present.

This means building out maps of stakeholders, looking at the impact of the new solutions on them, identifying advocates, understanding how to influence different stakeholders, and building the right relationships at the executive level. If you don’t win those advocates at the executive and senior management levels you risk resistance that filters down to end users. End users key off middle management, which is often the most resistant to change, so they need to hear from senior levels why this is so important and how it will help the organization.

Perhaps most important is addressing resistance immediately and candidly. Leaders need to be strong but fair. No one wants to have these conversations but if you avoid them it’s only going to get worse. Resistance is normal. You need to acknowledge that change may not be comfortable but that we still need to move forward. It’s up to the leaders to say “I know you’re not happy but we still need you to change and this is why.”