



Defining And Building A Culture Of Sustainability

An overview of the determinants and enablers of a culture of sustainability...and how to identify and develop them

Tim Cotter

Organisational and Environmental Psychologist

Contents

Introduction	3
The Sustainability Culture model	4
The Individual Enablers	6
The Organisational Enablers	7
Getting Started	10
Sustainability Framework	10
Measuring Where You're At	11
Conclusion	12
About The Author	12

Introduction

A couple of years ago, Awake was engaged by a client to measure the degree to which sustainability was truly embedded in their culture. This organisation had worked hard to engage its employees in sustainability, and wanted to know if it was working, and where to put their emphasis next.

In the search for a best practice model, a wide literature review revealed a paucity of effective models for this purpose. There was plenty of work done on measuring organisational sustainability, but this mostly centred on processes and downstream consequences of a sustainability focus, such as emissions and waste.

What we wanted was something that defined the elements of a culture of sustainability. What are the shared beliefs, norms, habits and assumptions that determine employee engagement in sustainability? More importantly, how do we go about shaping and supporting those elements to ensure that we deliberately embed sustainability in the culture of the organisation?

Faced with this challenge, we set about reviewing a vast body of research into sustainable behaviour, within both the corporate and personal domain. Drawing on our experience in the design of organisational metrics, along with expertise in the psychological drivers of sustainability, a new model for organisational sustainability was developed.

The Sustainability Culture model

The resulting model measures thirteen enablers of a culture of sustainability – five individual enablers and eight organisational enablers.

The **individual enablers** (beliefs, responsibility, knowledge, perceived control and perceived support) are things which need to be developed within individual employees in order for them to embrace sustainability. These are largely drawn from research into the psychology of sustainable behaviour, and represent those elements which characterise an individual more likely to engage in activities such as minimising energy use and cycling to work.

The **organisational enablers** are elements which the company needs to ensure are present and aligned with sustainability, namely facilities, processes, rewards and recognition, strategic commitment, leadership, job responsibilities, innovation and sustainability activities. Many of these enablers are derived from research which identifies the characteristics of organisations which have successfully engaged their employees in sustainability.

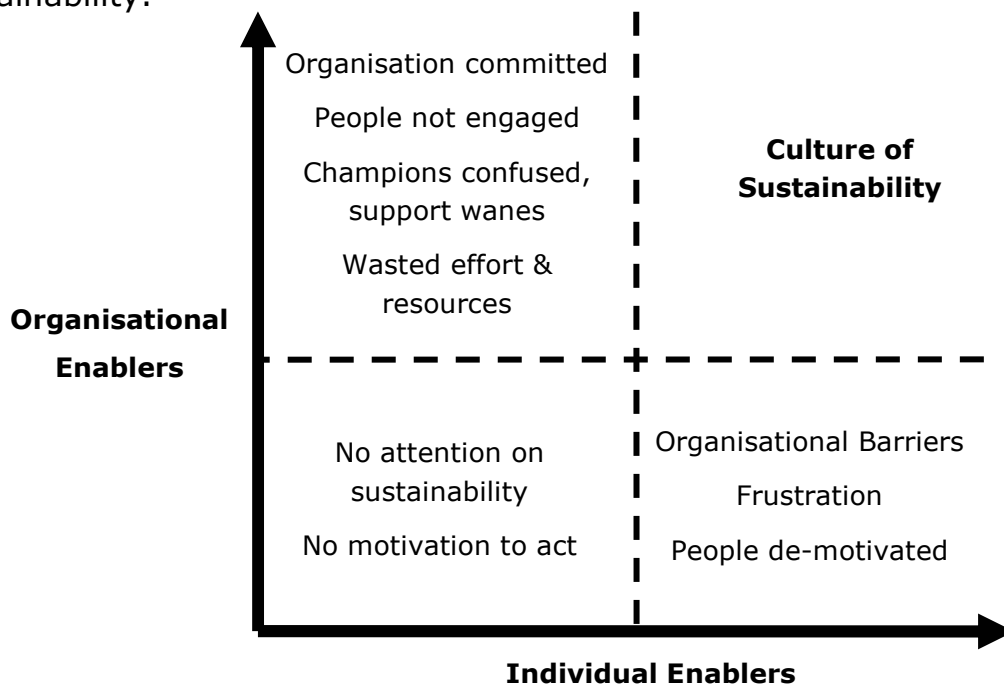


Figure 1: Interaction of individual and organisational enablers

The interplay of the individual and organisational enablers is illustrated in Figure 1.

Where neither set of enablers is strong, the organisation is at a starting point with sustainability – neither the individual will of employees nor the organisational support structures are in place to drive sustainability.

When individual enablers are strong, but not the organisational enablers, employee willingness to engage in sustainability can be thwarted by organisational barriers. Simple examples include having no facilities to support those who cycle to work, or unclear green procurement policies. Such a situation can lead to disillusionment and ultimately damage the organisations standing as a potential employer.

In a situation where strong organisational enablers are present, but weak individual enablers, a lack of employee engagement in sustainability is found. To the frustration of those managers and others who have championed the cause and worked to create processes and facilities which make sustainability easy, people just don't seem to buy into it. Not only can this seem a waste of energy and enthusiasm, but it can also represent a waste of resources.

When both individual and organisational enablers are strong, a culture of sustainability develops. People take responsibility for sustainability and see it as part of their job, and they are well equipped and supported to make it a priority.

Needless to say, the strategies which need to be employed in order to address gaps in organisational enablers are different to those for individual enablers.

Understanding the nature of these enablers, and their current levels within your organisation, is a crucial step in embedding sustainability into the culture.

The Individual Enablers

Beliefs about sustainability

When employees believe that sustainability is important, and that organisations should be doing something about it, a culture of sustainability is more likely to develop. When people do not have the basic belief that sustainability is something that they should be concerned about, it is difficult to engage them in sustainable action. In this situation, it is necessary to employ compelling and credible influencing strategies to get people onboard with the idea of sustainability.

Responsibility for sustainability

It is possible to believe that sustainability is important, but not take responsibility for it personally. If people feel a sense of ownership for sustainability, and they are willing to make it a priority in their lives and decisions, they are more likely to act in a sustainable manner. Fostering this sense of responsibility can be addressed through engagement activities which address how sustainability is related to our personal values, and moving it from an abstract concept to something that we have a personal stake in.

Perceived control over sustainability issues

One of the most important determinants of sustainable behaviour is the extent to which people feel like their actions will make a difference. If people can see that they have some control over their actions, and that their actions will make a difference in terms of sustainability, then they are more likely to embrace change. Conversely, many employees fail to see how they can effect change from their position in the organisation. Addressing this issue requires effective communication as to how each person's role can be executed differently to contribute to sustainability initiatives.

Perceived mandate/support to act

Feeling like they have the support of those around them, including their peers and their manager, encourages people to engage in sustainability-related behaviours. An organisation which emphasises this support, and facilitates a team focus on sustainability, is more likely to develop a culture of sustainability. Creating team strategies and targets, building and emphasising sustainability as a social norm in the organisation, and ensuring consistent messaging are all approaches to ensuring people feel that sustainability is supported and normalised.

Sustainability knowledge

If we are going to engage in sustainability, we need to know what to do. If people feel like they have knowledge and skills to take sustainable options, they are more likely to incorporate them into their day-to-day actions. One of the reasons people most commonly cite for not making sustainable choices is that they simply don't have sufficient information to make the right decision. Empowering employees with relevant, accurate information about sustainability is an important and ongoing task.

The Organisational Enablers

Strategic commitment to sustainability

People need to know that they have a mandate to prioritise sustainability, and that the organisation is committed to it as a way of being. Research shows that organisations which have a sustainability framework are more likely to be successful in introducing sustainability initiatives. Such a framework sets a clear vision, strategies and targets for sustainability, which is then consistently communicated and reinforced to all staff and stakeholders.

Sustainability leadership

All aspects of culture are driven from the top, and sustainability is no exception. If people feel that there is strong leadership commitment, and the behaviours of the leaders and managers are consistent with this commitment, then a culture of sustainability is more likely to be created. This is supported by research findings, which reveal that the best sustainability-focused organisations are typified by strong leadership in the area. Where leaders are found wanting in their support of sustainability, any change effort must start with examining their personal responsibility and commitments. Examining what it means to be a sustainability leader, and what behaviours one must display in order to support employee engagement in sustainability, is a crucial step in this process.

Activities to promote sustainability

In order for sustainability to flourish in an organisation, it needs to be communicated, reinforced and encouraged. The best organisations provide opportunities for people to learn about sustainability, reflect on what it means to them, and share ideas with others about how to make the organisation more sustainable.

Job responsibilities

People need to be clear about how sustainability fits into their job. Knowing what your responsibilities are, where the biggest opportunities for change are, and how your work fits into the organisations larger sustainability plans is an essential enabler for taking action.

Rewards & recognition

If people are reinforced for sustainable behaviours they are more likely to perform them. In many organisations, short-term thinking is rewarded, which provides an immediate barrier to embedding sustainability in the culture. Organisations that are successful in embedding sustainability are those who

have policies such as linking executive bonuses to sustainability objectives, rewarding teams for energy savings, and providing awards and recognition for individuals who champion sustainability initiatives.

Innovation

Sustainability is inextricably linked to innovation. When we take the view that embracing sustainability involves new ideas and new ways of doing business, then a culture which gives people opportunities to innovate is essential. Addressing a situation where a lack of innovation is a cultural barrier involves a wide organisational development focus. Indeed, sustainability can be the spearhead for the organisation to embrace innovation and to engage its workforce in a new way of operating.

Processes

The systems and processes of an organisation play a big part in the degree to which sustainability can be embedded. For instance, if there is a requirement that everything be printed on paper, then it is hard to reduce printing. A big part of creating a more sustainable organisation involves reviewing processes and removing those that are working against your goals. This in itself requires a high degree of employee involvement, something which can help to cement a sustainability focus in the culture.

Facilities

The way we act is greatly influenced by our physical surroundings. Even well-intentioned employees find it difficult to do the right thing if the environment does not support them. Providing showers to encourage cycling to work, and composting bins for responsible waste disposal, are examples of efforts to make facilities more supportive of sustainability. As with processes, encouraging employee feedback and involvement in reviewing facilities is an excellent way to help build engagement in sustainability.

Getting Started

Building a culture of sustainability requires a long-term commitment and the involvement of every department and team in the organisation.

There are many ways to approach the task of embedding sustainability into the culture. Building a sustainability framework, and measuring the current levels of the organisational and individual enablers, are two of the most important steps an organisation can take to begin on this path.

Sustainability Framework

A sustainability framework is a set of statements and commitments which outline the organisation's plans and strategies for operating with sustainability in mind. Sustainability frameworks come in many shapes and sizes, and there is no one way of developing one. However, most sustainability frameworks have a number of common elements. What follows is by no means an exhaustive list of the various ways in which organisations choose to articulate their sustainability commitments, but rather a brief summary of the main components.

The first is a vision (or a commitment or goal), which states the organisation's overall aim in terms of sustainability. For example, the environmental sustainability vision for Kogarah City Council is to achieve a 'Clean, Green and Sustainable City'.

Supporting the vision is usually a set of strategies - usually between four and eight of them - which the organisation intends to pursue in order to meet the vision. Typically, these are high-level statements such as "reduce our carbon emissions", which don't get into the detail of describing how this is going to be done.

The detail is contained in the final part of the sustainability framework, the

actions and projects which need to be executed in pursuit of the strategies – which in turn should move the organisation toward meeting its sustainability vision.

By far the most important ingredient in the development of a sustainability framework is the involvement of employees. By engaging people from the start, you can ensure clarity and buy-in. When the sustainability framework is rolled out, people know why it is there, and have some ownership for its success. People involvement also ensures that the sustainability issues addressed in the framework are relevant and reflect views from across the organisation, not just from where the sustainability team is sitting.

Measuring Where You're At

The Sustainability Culture model outlined in the earlier pages defines the thirteen enablers which need to be present in order to support the development of a culture of sustainability. By measuring the current state of those enablers, it is possible to identify any gaps and target efforts and resources more effectively. It also allows you to set an early baseline, against which progress can be tracked over time.

The **Sustainability Culture Indicator (SCI)** is a tool designed by Awake specifically for this purpose. The SCI is a robust, research-based survey tool which measures the level of each of the enablers. A customised report is prepared which analyses the organisation's results, and recommends steps for developing the enablers and further embedding sustainability into the culture.

Information about the SCI can be found at www.awake.com.au/sci

The SCI can be complemented by qualitative methods of reviewing the current state of sustainability in the organisation. These include interviews and focus groups, and can be conducted as part of the process for developing a sustainability framework.

Conclusion

Awake's Sustainability Culture model is an effort to define the key elements of a culture of sustainability, by reviewing empirical research into the determinants and defining characteristics of organisations which enjoy strong sustainability outcomes. The inclusion of the psychological and attitudinal drivers of sustainability within these elements addresses a gap in previous efforts to articulate the conditions required to build a sustainable organisation.

The key benefit of a rigorous and clearly defined model such as this is that it allows an organisation to deliberately build a culture of sustainability, rather than hoping that one emerges from various sustainability initiatives. By reviewing each of the enablers and taking steps to address any gaps, it is hoped that more organisations will enjoy the benefits of a workforce which is engaged and empowered for sustainability.

About the Author

Tim Cotter is a psychologist specialising in the psychology of sustainability. His consultancy, Awake, provides psychology-based tools and services which support organisations and communities to develop a culture of sustainability.



Since 2005 Awake has provided training, assessment services, consulting and thought leadership to communities and organisations seeking to

- design sustainability frameworks and strategies
- embed sustainability into organisational culture
- engage employees and residents in sustainable behaviours
- measure sustainability attitudes, drivers and behaviours
- develop sustainability programs and communications

Awake draws on expertise, experience and research in psychology to develop unique models and tools for inspiring sustainable action.