

# ***Building A Culture Of Sustainability***

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Leaders of organisations commonly express an intention to build a “culture of sustainability”. This is a more ambitious goal than one may think, and worthy of some examination.

A culture of sustainability refers to more than **operating** in an environmentally friendly manner, but is rather about developing a **sustainability mindset** – a set of values, beliefs and behaviours which ensure that sustainability is made a priority in every business decision. It is an undertaking which addresses something less tangible than converting the vehicle fleet to hybrids, but rather it is focused on converting the hearts and minds of individuals who make up the organisation.

## **A New Culture Challenge**

For many years, organisations have invested time, money and effort in creating, changing and transforming culture. Conventionally, the aim of these efforts has been to enhance commitment to the team, the company, and the customer. Now there is a new stakeholder on the culture change radar – the environment. As business comes under increasing scrutiny to be a responsible community citizen, companies are scrambling to find ways to do the right thing, or at least be seen to be doing the right thing, while maintaining economic viability. Rather than relying purely on compliance and technology to do the job, there is much to be gained from harnessing the power of everyone in the business. If everybody is focused on sustainability, and making it a priority, it becomes far easier to gain buy-in to such programs as energy-saving, and encourages sustainability innovation throughout the operational activities of the business. It is well-documented that behaviour change is far more likely if people believe in it, and want to do it, rather than being told to do it. This belief and desire is what underpins culture. So, how do we create this belief and desire for sustainability?

## **Key Elements of Sustainable Behaviour**

Let's start with 3 personal characteristics and mindsets that contribute to sustainable behaviour.

### **Self-Awareness & Alignment**

Studies have shown that people who engage in environmentally-friendly behaviour are more likely to have a strong awareness of their own beliefs and values, and how things relate to their decisions and behaviours. This kind of “fluency in oneself” is an important pre-cursor to being able to evaluate, for

instance, whether convenience and speed are more important than environmental impact on any given day. By increasing employees awareness of their values and beliefs, and how they play out in their behaviours around sustainability, we can increase the likelihood that they will do the right thing when next faced with a sustainability choice.

## Social Responsibility

Another predictor of sustainable behaviour is the level of responsibility we feel for those around us. Where people hold values which are solely focused on self-enhancement, rather than collective responsibility, they are less likely to put themselves out for the good of the environment and future generations. In fact, studies have shown that enhancing empathy, even in a laboratory setting, can have an effect on later efforts towards sustainability.

## Personal Responsibility

Also known as “locus of control (LOC)”, this factor refers to the individual’s sense that they can control the world around them. Research has found that people who feel like they have a lot of control over their lives (internal LOC) are more likely to act in an environmentally beneficial manner than those who feel that external factors are the main determinants of their outcomes (external LOC). This comes into sharp focus when deciding whether to make the extra effort to save shower water for the garden, in the knowledge that corporations are drawing mega litres of water per day to manufacture soft drinks. It takes a strong sense of personal responsibility to take the view that every one of my actions counts.

## Building the Culture

All of the elements above are able to be developed within individuals as part of a program to build a culture of sustainability. There are a number of key steps and conditions which need to be in place in order to make a culture of sustainability, well, sustainable.

### 1. Building self-awareness

This is not an exercise that is aimed at the head – instead it needs to engage the heart. People have **heard** enough about sustainability, what they need it to **feel** it. That is why Step 1 involves a wake-up call that connects each team member on a personal level. This can be achieved through a self-awareness exercise designed to, firstly, increase each persons connection with themselves – their values, beliefs and behaviours. It is only then, from that place of self-awareness, can we bring in the idea of sustainability and examine how our own actions support, or contradict, our beliefs and values. The resulting increase in self-connection is, in itself, a big step in the direction of sustainability.

## **2. Building Responsibility**

In order to act sustainably, people need to feel that they can make a difference. By introducing a series of scenarios and exercises designed to give people the perspective that they have the power to influence the sustainability not only of themselves, but also the organisation, it is possible to increase levels of personal and social responsibility. For example, one approach which works well is to get people to debate whether the responsibility for sustainability lies with the organisation or the individual. Such dialogue, effectively facilitated, can create profound realisations and change in perspective.

## **3. Building a Toolkit**

It can be challenging to make decisions which are consistent with our best intentions all of the time. Everyday “reality” can serve to sway us from doing the right thing. Nowhere is that more prevalent than in organisational life, where competing pressures and priorities abound. Those who have a toolbox of skills are better equipped to maintain consistency and alignment in their behaviours. This involves supporting people with skills such as values-based decision-making tools and influencing other people around sustainability. This aspect of culture-building addresses many of the sustainability barriers and dilemmas which people encounter when working in the real world, and supports them to keep on track.

## **4. Leading from the front**

As with all aspects of culture change, it is imperative that the leaders of the business are seen to be doing just that – leading. This involves asking the question “what am I prepared to give up in order to make us more sustainable?” – and then acting on the answer. There is an adage that people do not listen to what you say, they watch what you do. They also have to feel that you care, and are engaged, rather than just spying an opportunity to gain leverage in the community by being seen to be green. As a starting point, the leaders need to get along to the workshops and sustainability activities.

Building a culture of sustainability is about a lot more than putting up reminders to turn off lights. But the great thing is, once sustainability is entrenched in the culture, you will not need the signs.

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