



SUSTAINABILITY ADOPTION

A journey towards Employee Empowerment



Humankind is facing the biggest challenge of the 21st century and organizations are getting into gear to take their part. However, corporate sustainability programs defined by executives do not necessarily find an echo within the employee base. At times because of unfamiliarity, on others because they don't believe in them. Addressing the root causes and empowering employees can make a difference.

1. Introduction : The problem statement

Sustainability: a simple word designating an objective the world is urged to meet. Everybody agrees on the utter necessity to heal the planet, take better care of people, and implement virtuous business models. But when it comes to sustainability at work, employees are either not aware of what their company does, or worse, they buy into neither the strategy nor the results. In short, there is an issue with employee adoption. We often observe a “perception gap”¹ between the ambition of sustainability plans defined by decision-makers and their impact, perceived as low by the workforce.

All employees should be familiar with the span and ambition of their company’s strategy in terms of sustainability. Only then, and under certain circumstances, can they buy into it and ultimately, feel engaged in contributing to it. The challenge is that sustainability is usually a topic that is managed from the top.

So how is corporate vision transformed into something that every employee can understand, adopt and ultimately be a part of? How to avoid the pitfall of the staff feeling as though they are not part of the equation, or worse, that their company is greenwashing customers and citizens? And when convinced, how is the top-down vision turned into a collective sustainability mindset and routine?

In this point of view, we will explore a few levers driven by organizational change management which can help this

shift to occur. We will then elaborate on the conditions and prerequisites of their implementation necessary for their success.



Management – 75% are convinced to :

- Implement a robust sustainability plan
- Efficiently measure the sustainability performance
- Deploy the right management practices to promote sustainability



Employee base – 65% are convinced that:

- Employer commitment reflects a green and social washing
- Sustainability goals are unrealistic
- They are not empowered to lead day-to-day sustainable tasks

Chart 1: The “perception gap”. Adapted from Accenture analysis of executive and employee/consumer/citizen surveys, The sustainability consensus gap, 2022



2. Organizational change management frameworks can drive the shift in employee adoption...

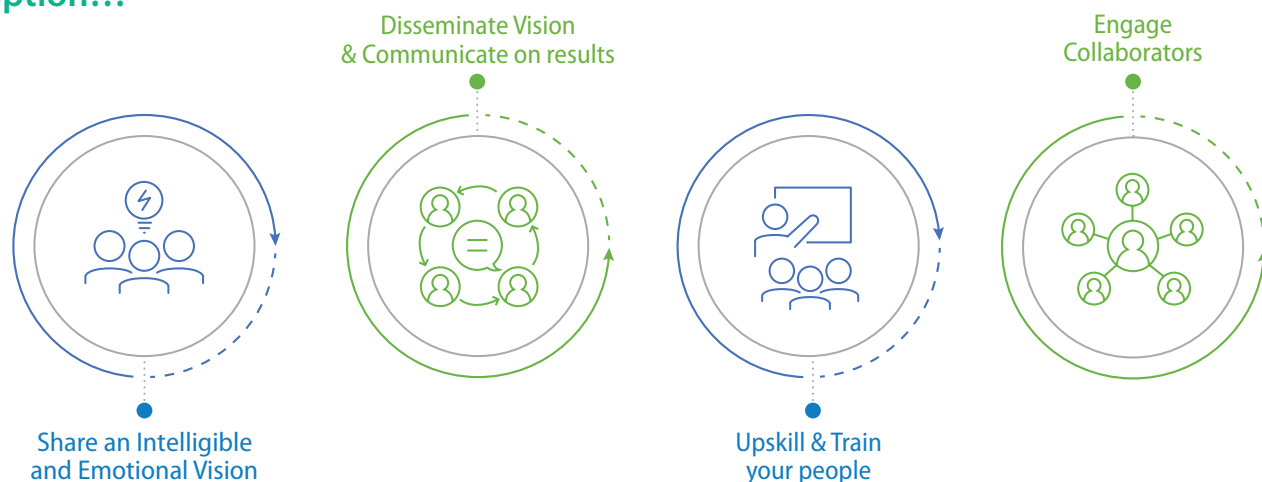


Chart 2: Organizational Change Management framework to foster employee adoption on sustainability plans

a. Sharing an intelligible and emotional vision of sustainability

The first thing to consider is making the organization's strategy clear and understood by all employees. Sustainability is a "catch-all word" that needs to be well defined in order to be well understood. Usually, the concept encompasses 3 dimensions: a/ environmental issues mitigation (e.g., climate change, loss of biodiversity, pollution, waste and plastic...), b/ social goals (e.g., human rights, diversity and inclusion...) and c/ economic aspects (e.g., circular economy, fair trade, raw material sourcing...). The priorities put on these 3 dimensions should be clear for every employee.

Another aspect is that sustainability programs are often driven by compliance with regulations (e.g., UN Sustainable Development Goals) and the pressure from market and shareholders to be active in this field. It's a good start, but they should also be meaningful to the staff and hence driven by values. Embedding some emotions into a CSR vision can help embark collaborators. Although equally important, communicating on 2050 carbon neutral plans might be less impactful than explaining how you will ensure child labor free subcontracting. The concept of sustainability is complex and first needs to be summarized in an easy fashion.

A few workshops gathering Leaders, Sustainability Sponsors, Subject Matter Experts and Employee Representatives can help define a sharp vision, providing clear insights of what sustainability means for the company in terms of ambition, priorities and roadmap. Typically, annual reports and the company's website will summarize this vision, illustrated by short and long-term initiatives.

b. Disseminate vision and communicate on results in a sincere and impactful way

But let's be honest, not all employees read annual reports. So how can we ensure a minimum level of awareness on the topic? Additionally, how can we reach out to them effectively? This is where the management layer is instrumental. Enabling middle managers with tangible tools to convey messages to their teams, leveraging communication kits that include a 10-slide presentation, an FAQ and few other artefacts, will bridge this gap and make the pitch easier to digest. The messages must be clear, concise, and standardized to all employees. Communicating about the vision is not enough – managers also need to receive regular briefings to update their teams on the latest results: which objectives is the company struggling to meet? Where is it behind on schedule?

c. Upskill and train your people

Upskilling your workforce will be key to drive their awareness and the adoption of your organization's practices. Where to start? Which areas to focus on? What are the expectations and requirements of your workforce? How to manage heterogeneous profiles and different levels of proficiency across your organization?

An effective way to answer these fundamental questions is to build a competency framework. It defines a certain knowledge and a set of behaviors that align with the sustainability objectives of your company. This framework is based upon 2 variables: depth of knowledge & learner profile.



The below framework illustrates how to create appropriate learning programs constituted of building blocks

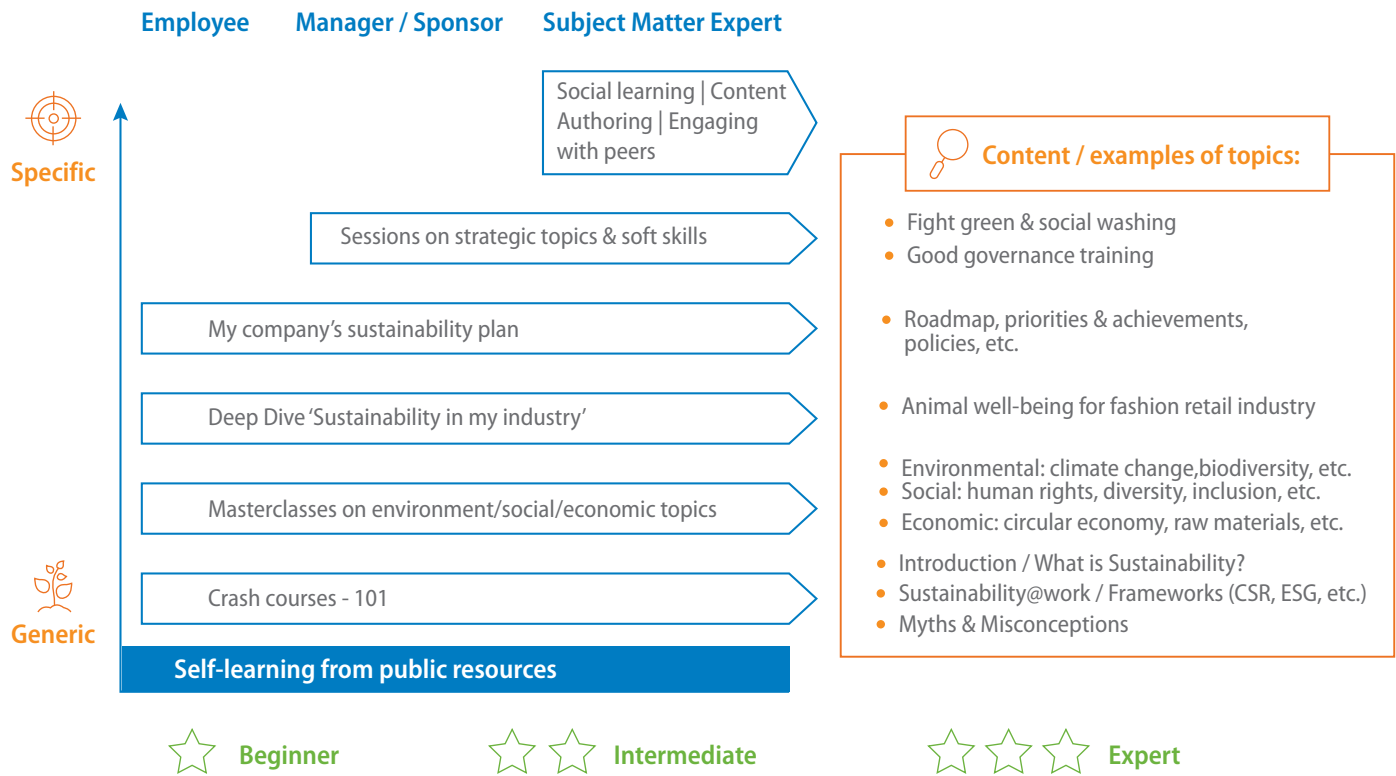


Chart 3: Illustration of a learning path on sustainability

d. Engage collaborators

Once trained, everyone is able to take part. Innovation/ideation platforms enable co-creation of sustainability projects while breaking the usual organizational silos. Launching gamification and challenges also significantly strengthens employee engagement. Below are 2 examples that can bring tangible results.

Launching gamification and challenges is a powerful way to boost employee engagement.

Gamification

The climate game, can you reach Net Zero by 2050?⁴

Financial times and Infosys made a partnership to develop a **data-driven simulation to raise awareness about global environmental and social issues** by making crucial decision to reach Net Zero by 2050. It is structured in 3 rounds aiming at reducing and human effects on Earth (e.g., less pollution, less CO2). preserving Earth's resources, and improving the well-being of humankind. We can understand who the powerful actors of this change are, and which actions are the most efficient.

11 months after its creation, this game generated **half a million views and 25000+ new players per day.**

Challenges

Digital Frugality among employees, an example of a sustainability routine

In analogy with the EarthShare Engage mobile app,⁵ any kind of application can be developed to propose healthy challenge among employees to foster more sustainable habits. For instance, an app proposing a Digital Frugality Day (e.g., cleaning mailboxes, cleaning the data stored, etc.). The performance is shared in the app with all registered employees. The winner can share advice and best practices with others on how to achieve it through social learning techniques.

Chart 4: Gamification & Challenges boosting employee engagement



3. ... but there are conditions and prerequisites to make it happen.

a. Build a community of sustainability champions

Engaging with employees requires defining some internal ways of working. Organizations can set up networks of sustainability champions who can directly interact with workers, convey information to them and speak on their behalf.

Good champions show a genuine interest in the topic of sustainability and are willing to engage actively in the

transformation of their company. Below is a non-exhaustive list of what champions can typically do:

- Create learning content on sustainability
- Sensitize and continuously train employees on sustainability at work, taking into consideration the reality of its evolution (e.g., new trends in the industry, achievements completed by the company, updates in regulations)
- Onboard new joiners
- Launch employee surveys to monitor feedback/perception on the ground

- Drive larger employee engagement initiatives (e.g., serious games and challenges mentioned earlier)
- Lead or arbitrate co-creation of sustainability projects for the company (through “greenathon”, “socialathon” initiatives)
- Feed the management with new ideas and projects to be launched
- Volunteer to belong to external associations such as the “Climate Fresk”⁶
- Share best practices and knowledge within the community, etc.

b. Ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities in the Sustainability governance

Sustainability governance is a prerequisite to the definition of organizational sustainability strategies. It helps to “keep track of their efficiency, manage goals and reporting, and ensure overall accountability”⁷. To be effective, this governance should have clear roles and responsibilities for the involved stakeholders. The below figure⁸ represents a typical governance model, from the Board of Directors and Sustainability Committee to the business workstreams and people on the ground – champions included.



Chart 5: illustration of a sustainability governance model

In a nutshell⁸:

- The Head of Sustainability, also commonly called Chief Sustainability Officer, leads the Sustainability Office in charge of defining and implementing the sustainability strategy
- The Sustainability Office is a team which engages with internal and external stakeholders and provides guidance and coordination in their implementation across business functions
- The Sustainability Office reports to the Sustainability Steering Committee which reviews and validates the strategy, approves targets, and monitors execution
- Sustainability workstreams are on the business side and their leaders are accountable for meeting targets as planned
- The champions are the ambassadors of the corporate strategy for sustainability

Moreover, external advisory groups can be involved (with no reporting line) to provide organizations with expertise and outside perspectives related to ESG topics.

c. Align HR and management practices with employee engagement strategy

Empowering the workforce requires to define overarching HR and management policies that pave the way for employee engagement in sustainability. Targeted effort should be dedicated, for instance, to the below processes:

- **Recruitment:** Use virtual tools or the metaverse for candidate interview / Make sustainability a criterion for candidate selection
- **Onboarding:** Include the Sustainability goals and mission in the onboarding process, explaining their importance to new joiners
- **Performance & Compensation:** Include a sustainability goal in employee performance goal templates / Set bonuses for employees engaged in sustainability projects and/or communities
- **Learning:** Allow x hours a week to teams to self-learn or get trained online, or simply to share knowledge with peers
- **Opportunities:** Allow employees to take time off to support volunteering and charity activities
- **Workplace:** Develop a hybrid working model allowing reduction of carbon footprint

Conclusion

The ability of organizations to articulate a clear and honest pitch on how they fight environmental issues while protecting people, is a key factor for employee adoption of corporate sustainability. Upskilling and engaging people is another condition that can turn employees into true ambassadors of the company's sustainability culture, provided the appropriate environment is in place.

Organizations will not operate this shift overnight; in a world where economic, reputational, and regulatory issues are increasingly numerous, complex, and intertwined – but succeeding in this endeavor can allow them to lead the race in the war for talent. At a time where the Great Resignation literally smashes the established order, it is crucial to attract the next generation of workers eagerly searching for meaning. And finding it in undisputable brand reputation forged with honesty, transparency, and commitment on sustainability.



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