

People Make the Sustainable Difference

Employees are the Key to Successful
Environmental Initiatives

By Michael Broberg



Northwest Businesses Impact Worldwide Efforts

We all know that the world has become a much smaller place. And right here in the Pacific Northwest, we recognize how vital it is for us to take responsibility for how our business practices impact the rest of the world.

President Obama has asked us to do our part to address environmental challenges, including reducing our dependence on traditional energy sources. Obama tells us that the key to making these changes lies in the resourcefulness of Americans: “The answers to our problems don’t lie beyond our reach. They exist in our laboratories and our universities; in our fields and our factories; in the imaginations of our entrepreneurs and in the pride of the hardest-working people on Earth.”

People are at the root of making any sustainable changes in our communities and within our organizations. We each need to decide what part we will play in making needed environmental changes happen.

Changing People is Difficult

As with most corporate initiatives, achieving desired results requires getting people to think and act differently. And that is not an easy task. More often than not, the reason for failed corporate projects is tied to not helping people get through the change as opposed to other possible culprits such as a failed technology. Companies need to determine how to affect a change in the individual behaviors of their employees.

Consider last year’s change in attitude toward the use of local public transportation. Last July, more than 9.2 million riders took TriMet transportation, more than in any previous month. By taking the bus or MAX to work, we can all help reduce environmental impacts in our community. With the right motivation, like rising gas prices, people are more likely to leave their cars at home.

How to Help People Change

Companies need to tap into the appropriate motivational principles to collectively make a sustainable change. If managers rally their people behind the right objectives, significant changes can be successfully implemented. Outlined below are three key drivers of employee change:

Leadership Commitment – Successful sustainability initiatives are often supported by company leaders who set the right example through their own behaviors. Success also requires holding people accountable for following through on commitments and hitting desired results.

Jim Bernau, founder of Willamette Valley Vineyards, is one local champion for supporting the environmental needs of our community. Among a number of sustainability initiatives, his company has a special recycling program for bottles, corks and shippers. Bernau also uses biodiesel for company vehicles and offers 50 gallons of biodiesel per month to his employees. “Our greatest return on our sustainability efforts has been improved customer and employee satisfaction,” says

Bernau. “Our people and our customers appreciate being associated with a brand that cares about the world around them.”

Employee Empowerment – Involving people in the process of designing change is critical. Employees can often provide the best ideas for driving sustainability in an organization. Companies can tap into employee creativity and enthusiasm by providing a forum for ideas to be shared, explored and acted upon. Setting guidelines and objectives for employee-driven efforts also helps keep them in line with overall corporate strategy and financial targets.

Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU) does a good job of getting its employees involved in green efforts. It has a designated “Green Team” that voluntarily leads sustainability initiatives. Participation varies from attending monthly meetings, leading events or simply submitting ideas via a website. Since the “Green Team” creation in 2004, OHSU has seen significant improvements in its environmental efforts overall. And in 2007, OHSU received the “Healthcare without Harm Environmental Leadership Award.”

Education and Communications – People need to understand the reasons for an initiative and what it means to them personally before they will be willing to own and execute a change. Different employee groups will be motivated by different incentives. Some necessary change motivators include training, targeted communications, ongoing support, and links to performance monitoring.

The Intel “Employee Sustainability Network” is a chartered group of employees tasked with increasing employee participation in sustainability efforts. This is done through multiple channels such as guest speakers, newsletters, blogs and community events.

Yet not all communications efforts need to be on a large scale, even small initiatives can make a difference. To save energy, the US Bancorp tower downtown uses a simple sign to encourage tenants and visitors to use the revolving doors.

Tap Into the Power of Your People

We all need to do our part to make our world a better place. As companies, our greatest results will come from leading, enabling and encouraging our people to drive change. When done well, the end result will be better business and a better world.

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