

How people influence long-term sustainable success

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Executive Summary

You've invested significant energy and resources into developing your organization's sustainability initiatives and may be asking yourself, "How do I ensure that our vision sticks?" Ultimately, the long-term success of your sustainability efforts is a direct result of your ability to influence long-lasting behavioral change.

Consider Dave, a director at a medium-sized retail organization, and his experiences planning and executing his company's sustainability programs. Along with developing a 20-year sustainability vision, Dave implemented some short-term initiatives to focus the organization's commitment to the local and global environments.

After several months of attention and momentum, many of the projects began losing steam. Employees were openly challenging some of the sustainability activities, which, just a few months earlier, were receiving accolades. Dave began to wonder what went wrong.

For sustainability initiatives to outlast the latest "flavor of the month," there are several critical factors to consider, including the fact that changing behavior is difficult, and important messages need to be frequently reinforced and delivered in different ways to different employees.

Successful companies manage employee behavior change

1. Articulate benefits

Clearly communicate benefits of the program at the global, local, organizational, team and individual levels. Account for the fact that benefits of your sustainability programs pay off in the short and long term.

2. Hold leadership accountable

Enable leadership to visibly and actively demonstrate commitment to the program; hold them accountable.

3. Empower employees

Encourage involvement at all levels to participate in designing programs and solutions for your organization — this includes the skeptics.

4. Manage scope

Don't bite off more than you can handle initially; roll out pilot programs if necessary and start local before going global.

5. Pursue holistic solutions

Think outside of traditional scope: How green are your products and packaging? Is your supply chain following good sustainable solutions?

6. Customize communications

Customize messages based on target audiences. Tailor your plans for rolling out your program for culture, age, location and geographical differences; leverage the right channels for various groups within your organization.

Changing People is Difficult

If changing long-term behavior were easy, we'd consistently remember to print multi-sided documents and bring our reusable shopping bags to the store. Finding ways to take advantage of small changes at a point of origin is one way to capitalize on changes. For example, Fred Meyer recently reported that two short years after launching its initiative for reusable grocery bags 20 tons of plastic has been diverted from landfills. Small things like offering eco-friendly bags at the checkout counter and friendly signs in the parking lot to remind customers to bring in bags go a long way in impacting the way people behave.

Changing habits is easier said than done. Studies show that changing the way we do common tasks can actually trigger the pain centers of our brains; it's no wonder that we can't seem to remember to put the shopping bags back in the trunk after unpacking them.

Like any substantive change initiative, the best sustainability initiatives leverage a combination of emotional appeal, logical appeal and low-impact change in behavior. Some of the most successful changes, for example, include natural changes in how we do things such as co-mingling our recycling or introducing recycling bins at our sporting events, the airport and other public locales.

Recipe for Success

Back to Dave's company, his team fell short along several change-management fronts, so it was no surprise when efforts began to wane after a few months. While benefits of sustainability initiatives were communicated in a large kickoff, his team failed to frequently reinforce important messages through multiple channels. Additionally, the leadership team's focus was diverted to new cost-reduction programs and initial commitment to the program was called into question.

Despite these flaws, the main reason the initial projects failed was due to the low level of employee involvement and the lack of lasting behavioral change.

Fortunately, Dave was able to jump-start the initiative by implementing some best practice techniques, such as:

- Refine program scope. Dave pared down some of his initial ideas that, while valuable, were too big for early adoption. Instead, he focused his efforts on a small pilot at one of his local stores. Dave carefully selected a site that had strong local leadership and support for sustainability initiatives. Jointly, they selected two activities that were simple for employees to understand and easy to measure direct involvement and benefits. They met regularly to determine what was and wasn't working as planned.

Key leverage points and lessons learned served as the implementation blueprint for subsequent rollouts across the organization.

- Pursue holistic solutions. Dave realized that while starting with internal business practices for his initiatives made sense, a stronger case could be made by thinking more broadly and including their own supply chain, customers and products in the scope of their sustainability efforts.

Dave partnered with legal, marketing and supply chain leaders to look at how the company is being socially responsible. In collaboration, they identified additional short-term efforts that dramatically increased the value of the overall sustainability program.

Dave and his team took a hard look at their supply chain practices and partners and applied lessons from successful local companies such as Nike and the Port of Seattle. Similar to Nike's partnership with Delta to offset carbon emissions in exchange for exclusivity, Dave's team was able to negotiate a mutually beneficial contract with a local garbage hauler who purchased services from Dave's organization.

Dave also took an approach similar to the Port of Seattle to formulate an EcoPartnership with retail store contractors who were building new locations nationally. Similar to the partnership the port has with China, Dave and his contractors mutually researched and refined building practices and construction management to be more environmentally sustainable.

- Customize communications for target audiences. Dave also built a comprehensive communications and marketing plan for his team to execute. While initial program e-mails and newsletters had some impact, ongoing e-mails were only reaching a small percentage of employees through traditional e-mail channels.

Dave realized how differences in age groups, geographies, locations, culture, history, etc., would require different communication techniques. Dave began to take advantage of social networking through Twitter and FaceBook, as well as texting for younger new hires and interns. He used more formal memos for the senior staff along with integrated management talking points and a program dashboard for manager and departmental meetings. To address the global nature of the business, company-wide updates were handled via a blog and Web site. He also introduced geographic focus calls with key site managers globally.

Long-term Behavior Change

In today's global and organization environment, building a consensus for sustainability initiatives is no longer the challenge. The challenge today is maintaining initial excitement, deepening understanding and enabling long-term behavior change.

About Hitachi Consulting Corporation

As Hitachi, Ltd.'s (NYSE: HIT) global consulting company, with operations in the United States, Europe and Asia, Hitachi Consulting is a recognized leader in delivering proven business and IT strategies and solutions to Global 2000 companies across many industries. With a balanced view of strategy, people, process and technology, we work with companies to understand their unique business needs, and to develop and implement practical business strategies and technology solutions. From business strategy development through application deployment, our consultants are committed to helping clients quickly realize measurable business value and achieve sustainable ROI.

Hitachi Consulting's client base includes 25 percent of the Global 100 as well as many leading mid-market companies. We offer a client-focused, collaborative approach and transfer knowledge throughout each engagement.

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