

Nine Beacons to Chart Your Business Towards a Sustainable Future

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Introduction

Business executives acknowledge the call for corporate sustainability. Although the business case for managing in an environmentally responsible way continues to grow, many leaders feel disoriented when contemplating where to start. Overwhelm is a common culprit for delayed action on corporate sustainability. In response, this document offers nine sequential steps, accompanied with actionable recommendations, to help leaders chart their organization's route towards a sustainable future.

The following nine sequential steps offer business leaders a guide to begin the sustainability journey:

1. Choose the Cruise: The Different Types of Sustainable Organizations
2. Set the Sails: Top-Down Leadership
3. Gauge Today's Trajectory: Baselineing and Benchmarking
4. Consult the Crew: The Power of Staff Surveys
5. Acculturation: Seven Tips to Normalize Sustainability
6. Tying it All Together: Goal Development
7. Chart the Route: Sustainability Roadmapping
8. All Hands On Deck: Stakeholder Engagement and Education
9. On the Right Tack: Ongoing Measurement and Evaluation

About Solutions in Sustainability

Solutions in Sustainability exists to help businesses navigate the nuances of integrating sustainability in the workplace. We are clean energy specialists that help businesses understand their relationship with energy today, and work towards the sustainability goals of tomorrow. We do this through in-depth energy analyses, strategic energy roadmaps, and magnetic stakeholder engagement and education around our client's sustainability goals. We also help businesses contemplate sustainability goals that may be right for them if none currently exist. For more information, visit the [Solutions in Sustainability website](#).

1. Choose the Cruise: The Different Types of Sustainable Organizations

When it comes to corporate sustainability, businesses often fall into one of three categories: leaders, practitioners, or traditionalists. How would you categorize your organization?

Sustainably-oriented organizations typically fall into one of three categories:

- **Sustainability Leaders** are characterized by a balanced triple bottom line (TBL) approach. TBL means economic, environmental, and social dimensions carry the same weight of importance in all business decisions. Leaders have built strategies and practices around sustainability from the corporate level down through the

supply chain. These organizations understand profit and sustainability are not opposing forces, but rather synergistic.

- **Sustainability Practitioners** acknowledge the importance of sustainability but don't adopt a TBL-balanced approach. For example, agendas may be extremely focused on a single facet such as the environment or social challenges, but do not execute a balanced TBL strategy.
- **Traditionalists** keep sustainability separate from business performance. For example, a company may decide to keep corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives independent from business operations, approaching sustainability through a philanthropy lens.

The Origin: Identifying the Starting Point

For a variety of reasons, businesses are beginning to recognize the value of the sustainable enterprise. Whether you're receiving pressure from customers, employees, or investors, the timing for a sustainability makeover couldn't be better.

For example, did you know that a [2019 Fast Company survey](#) found that 70% of young professionals would be more likely to stay with an employer containing a strong sustainability plan? 40% of young professionals chose their last job based on corporate sustainability. Consumers are increasingly [voting with their dollars](#) — against unsustainable brands. Savvy business owners understand the advantage sustainability plays in attracting top talent and customers.

But change is difficult.

A Sea Change

Have you ever altered the course of a [75-foot racing yacht](#)? We haven't either, but we're told it can only happen with a coordinated team effort and tactful execution. And like that yacht, effective organizational change can only occur if everyone is on board. It takes a coordinated effort to agree to head toward the new direction together.

Companies differ in their degree of integrating sustainability principles into their practices and culture. This is because the core corporate sustainability obstacle stems from

balancing a business's operations, goals, and business model to meet the demands and expectations of its external stakeholders — as well as the aspirations of its employees.

Recent research from [MIT Sloan and the Boston Consulting Group](#) found that, "over 90% of executives consider sustainability to be important. While 60% of companies have a sustainability strategy, only 25% have developed a clear business case for their sustainability efforts."

This may explain why traditionalist companies represent the long-standing model for corporate sustainability. But does a traditional approach position your business to compete in a global marketplace as societal values continue to evolve? An increasing number of business leaders don't think so.

New Signals

The case for corporate sustainability is only growing. In recent years, we've noted monumental entrants to the sustainability conversation. For example, Larry Fink, CEO of Blackrock, raised investor's eyebrows in January 2021 after issuing an [open letter to CEOs](#) calling for action on "capital management, long-term strategy, purpose and climate change." *Blackrock manages a tidy \$7 trillion investment portfolio.*

Mr. Fink went on to conclude, "I believe that the pandemic has presented such an existential crisis – such a stark reminder of our fragility – that it has driven us to confront the global threat of climate change more forcefully and to consider how, like the pandemic, it will alter our lives."

[Research](#) by CDP, a non-profit charity that operates global disclosure systems for investors, discovered a link between business leadership on climate change and profitability. The report concludes, "Corporations actively managing and planning for climate change secure an 18% higher return on investment (ROI) than companies that aren't – and 67% higher than companies who refuse to disclose their emissions."

The benefits don't stop at earnings. The report also cited a link to lower risk, concluding, "Companies investing in carbon reductions achieved a 50% lower volatility of earnings over the past decade and 21% stronger dividends than their low-ranking peers."

The Tides are Changing

Business leaders find themselves navigating a dramatic shift. Influential investors are calling for sustainability throughout the business community. Professionals increasingly seek to work for employers that value sustainability. Customers [demand](#) more sustainable products and services. The benefits for businesses to address sustainability are mounting. The facts are clear — sustainability is in. Can your organization afford not to act?

How would you characterize your organization today? If you don't claim "Sustainability Leader", that's OK!

Is your organization interested in further embracing sustainability, but unsure where to start? Continue reading for suggestions to consider when starting your sustainability journey.

2. Setting the Sails: Top-Down Leadership

Staff-led support for sustainability, while helpful, cannot create long-term change on its own. Impactful corporate sustainability leadership must come from the C-Suite.

Have you ever been a part of a small group that's created huge results? Perhaps you've volunteered for a cause you believe in, or successfully taught a young child the benefits of drawing on paper, instead of the living room wall? Many of us know the feeling when small contributions lead to meaningful outcomes.

Grassroots movements often generate collective pressure for moving the needle on national policy. But this approach isn't nearly as effective in the workplace.

Challenges of Organizational Change

Like a few ants attempting to budge a coconut, staff-led corporate sustainability initiatives rarely impact company policy on the scale required to enact meaningful, lasting change.

Corporate sustainability leadership must come from the top. The rationale appears multi-faceted.

Many businesses see the importance of sustainability to their employees. You may find staff yearning for corporate sustainability embodied in employee-led "green teams". Green teams may help plan activities such as trash pick-ups or recycling drives. They can offer staff the sustainability switch that many purpose-seeking employees crave. While helpful, these groups often lack the authority required to enact long-term impacts needed at the organizational level.

Too many organizations allow corporate sustainability to ride on the whims of a few well-intentioned employees. When internal champions move on, sustainability efforts can wither or disappear altogether. Like a business unit, program success should never hinge on only a few individuals.

Many business leaders recognize the importance of sustainability but find it difficult to know where to start. And that's OK. For busy executives, it can be scary to contemplate the change required.

Starting is Easy: Signal Intention

At this step, the only requisite for business leaders to start the journey is signaling an interest in sustainability.

To make things easier, consider shifting the mindset. Frame sustainability as an opportunity rather than a threat. Many business leaders errantly associate sustainability with increased costs. Approach the subject of sustainability with an open mind. These are the only necessary prerequisites to get started.

So what are some useful steps to set the sails for a journey towards sustainability? Glad you asked! Check out the next section for suggestions to get started.

3. Gauging Today's Trajectory: Baselineing and Benchmarking

Beginning the corporate sustainability journey requires an initial check-up. Baselineing and benchmarking offer business leaders an objective analysis of existing organizational operations to help run a tight ship.

The path towards a sustainable future starts with the father of management, Peter F. Drucker, who famously quipped, "You can't manage what you can't measure." Evaluating today's standing is a prerequisite for tracking progress towards any new destination.

Drop the Baseline

When it comes to sustainability, we industry nerds call this baselineing. Much like a health check-up before a new workout regimen, baselineing helps gauge a current level of health against a fitter, future self.

If not already doing so, businesses should track and quantify all resource inflows and outflows, including "waste". These represent literal dollar bills entering and leaving your organization. Most common forms include utilities, water, raw materials, fuel for fleet vehicles, or any other resources required for uninterrupted business operation. Baselineing financials helps businesses calculate their unit of consumption per unit of production.

Baselineing also helps determine what's already measured and, just as importantly, recognize what is not. For example, if your business isn't already tracking water consumption, it would be impossible to vet savings following water efficiency upgrades.

If you haven't performed a comprehensive baseline assessment, make sure it's at the top of your list. Tools such as the EPA's [Energy Star Portfolio Manager](#) can get businesses started on the right track to future savings through energy management. The EPA also offers resources for companies interested in performing a [greenhouse gas \(GHG\) inventory](#).

Benchmarking: How Do You Compare?

Baselineing also allows companies to compare consumption against peers in the region and industry. This comparison is called benchmarking. Understanding how your organization stacks up against competitors can help identify opportunities for improvements.

Think of benchmarking as “keeping up with the Joneses”. But instead of feeling a need to park a shiny new SUV in the driveway, your peers’ behavior may drive more efficient resource consumption.

To normalize, compare resource consumption on a unit-per-square-foot index. For example, how much energy or water did a facility consume per-square-foot of floor space last year? Other comparisons could include consumption per employee or unit of production. Most companies pay close attention to their competition in other areas (e.g. sales or market share) but don't know where they stack up when it comes to resource consumption.

When it comes to benchmarking energy consumption, the Energy Information Agency (IEA) maintains a database of building energy-use by sector and geographic location throughout the U.S. The document is pragmatically titled the [Commercial Building Energy Consumption Survey](#) (CBECS). *IEA performed the most recent survey in 2018 and will publish detailed results by summer 2021.*

Materiality Mapping: Discovering Hidden Treasure

Is your organization exploring all areas for potential improvement? Have you considered key sustainability challenges and opportunities specific to your industry?

Materiality maps offer business leaders key insights into the greatest sustainability opportunities based on the unique challenges their industry presents. For example, a food and beverage manufacturer will experience different sustainability challenges than an insurance company. Materiality maps help leaders understand the opportunities. Use materiality maps to ensure you’re considering all opportunities relevant to your industry.

Materiality assessments also help identify the sustainability topics that may matter most to your investors. They provide investors with a useful framework that links sustainability initiatives to effective business practices.

Make sure you’re starting any sustainability journey with detailed baselining, benchmarking, and materiality mapping first. It’s never too late to start. Continue to the next segment for tips to build your data arsenal.

4. Consult the Crew: The Power of Staff Surveys

Business leaders often overlook an important voice in corporate sustainability. Don't forget to utilize your most important asset — your people.

Like navigating a challenging escape room or locating those pesky reading glasses, sustainability leaders can often find solutions right under our noses. (Or on top of our head. Anyone else?)

Any successful corporate sustainability program must include employees from day one.

Genuinely involving staff early in the process invites ownership and inclusion. Gauge the temperature of the people in your organization on sustainability. Ask your staff which sustainability initiatives would mean the most to them.

Ask the Experts

Employees are the experts in their respective tasks. If asked, they are often eager to open up and share. They may offer creative solutions for savings on activities dear to them or relevant to their work. They'll be motivated to take action and ownership. Simply asking could save you money and earn valuable buy-in down the road. But first, you must show you value their input.

Remember, you go to great lengths to hire smart people. Make sure you harness their collective brainpower when it comes to sustainability. Learn the power of asking the right questions. The difference of a couple of choice words can improve the quality of response rates.

You don't need to have all the answers. Don't be afraid to ask for input. Like the Dad stereotype, I've seen leaders too afraid to shove their ego aside to ask for directions. They missed out on huge opportunities to gain valuable insights. (Or the route to the nearest restroom.)

Sustainability surveys also provide an optimal opportunity to check in on employees well-being. For example, how motivated are they feeling? What other challenges are they facing? When was the last time they weren't wearing slippers during a Zoom call with a client?

Genuine efforts to request staff feedback outside of annual review cycles show you value your employees' input. Offer an anonymous option to ensure employees feel safe to share their ideas. Provide incentives for ideas or policies that executive leadership may adopt. (Remember the appeal of a bonus?)

When it comes to sustainability surveys, don't stop with staff. For extra credit, you may also invite your Board or customers to take part in the survey. Inviting key stakeholders to take part in the process will help deepen relationships. Doing so can also serve as a great backstop to show how company priorities tie to stakeholder feedback.

Open Ears, Open Mind

But don't forget the most important part. **Pay attention to the responses!**

Leadership should salivate over the opportunity to read every response. Survey results are a veritable gold-mine of internal data points. Like finding that roll of hundred dollar bills in the jacket you purchased from the thrift store, you never know what else you might discover.

Don't feel obligated to make any bold sustainability commitments at this point. (We'll discuss that in a future roadmapping phase.) Instead, take this time to show staff that you are listening. For higher impact, tap a member of the executive team to provide a high-level summary of survey feedback in the next all-staff engagement. Show employees you value their input. Use sustainability as a mechanism to bridge gaps between senior leadership and staff. The results may surprise you.

5. Acculturation: Seven Tips to Normalize Sustainability

Each corporate culture is unique. Find creative ways to build the virtues of sustainability into the DNA of your organization.

I once showed up to a job interview in dressed-down attire - slacks and a button-up dress shirt. I was a bit nervous due to the fact I wasn't wearing a suit.

The business owner I met appeared confused by my dress. He entered the interview wearing board shorts and sandals. Given, I was interviewing for a position as a brewery

tour driver...at a brewery...in San Diego. This former midwestern engineer quickly learned to acculturate.

Every company culture is unique. Each organization requires a different approach to garner buy-in for new initiatives. After leadership sets the tone, it takes time for the workforce to acculturate and adapt to new processes and norms. Sustainability is no different.

But there's good news. When it comes to sustainability, business leaders have an endless variety of engagement opportunities at their disposal. Don't be afraid to experiment. Make the mistakes required to learn what works and what doesn't.

Getting Out of the Harbor

Here are some tips to help integrate a culture of sustainability within your organization:

1. Listen to feedback in staff surveys (refer to earlier Section 4). Engage in informal conversations about sustainability with your direct reports. Understand the role of the company through the eyes of stakeholders.
2. Create a "Green Team" if one doesn't exist already. Invite employees to be ambassadors of sustainability throughout the organization. Encourage staff participation. Invite a representative of the green team to provide regular updates at senior leadership meetings.
3. Start a series of town halls around sustainability. Invite discussion, and don't be defensive. Wisdom is everywhere.
4. Create a panel of customers. Learn what sustainability initiatives are important to them.
5. Don't forget to engage your Board. Contrary to popular opinion, the Board will often be your biggest champions and will help open doors. They may even provide ideas or resources of their own.
6. Let staff hear senior leadership extol the importance of sustainability. Allow for a brief sustainability update during all-staff meetings. Share and celebrate accomplishments.

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7. Query business partners for success stories. Invite partners to share their sustainability stories with your business leaders and staff. Provide opportunities for relationship building and idea-sharing with key business partners such as suppliers or vendors.

Stay the Course

Acculturation involves change. Change is hard. It takes time. Like a sunrise, don't expect it to happen overnight.

Remember the many benefits of incorporating sustainability into business operations. Whether satisfying customer demand, aligning with employees' values, or discovering the business imperative from more efficient operations, embedding a culture of sustainability takes time. If done right, the benefits will be well worth the effort.

And in case readers are wondering, despite my dress, *I landed the job!*

6. Tying It All Together: Goal Development

Many businesses don't know where to start when it comes to setting sustainability goals. Rely on data to make informed, ambitious yet attainable goals.

Running a sub-four-minute mile. Memorizing pi out to 100 digits. Daily meditation. Splitting an 8-pound pizza with your best friend for a reward of posting your picture on the restaurant wall.

We all have goals. Corporate sustainability presents no exceptions.

Starting Point

Previous articles covered staff surveys, engaging with staff and customers, baselining, and benchmarking. If done correctly, these activities can reap a mountain of data points. Now, how to incorporate sustainability into the long-term goals of the organization?

Making commitments can be scary. Like that 15-mile hike coming up this weekend that you committed to six months ago. What if you don't reach the intended goal? What hazards may lie along the way? Did I overcommit?

Luckily, there are some guiding principles to help create meaningful corporate sustainability goals.

First, commit to ongoing collaboration. Leadership should set sustainability goals based on input from the organization - not in a vacuum. Failing to interface with key stakeholder groups throughout the process (not just at the start) misses a huge opportunity. It also all but dooms successful implementation.

Consider the following. Staff, consumers, suppliers, and even the general public can hold powerful insights along the goal development journey. These stakeholders are the key to success. Continuing to understand the priorities of such groups is essential for buy-in. While cumbersome, making time for frequent check-ins during the goal development phase will pay dividends in the long run.

Failing to include stakeholder input reduces the future likelihood of widespread adoption and buy-in. It also misses a crucial opportunity for increased collaboration.

Charting the Course

After establishing priorities, you may be unsure of where to set the goalposts. Goals interpreted as too ambitious may risk overwhelming staff. Goals with too little ambition often fail to elicit motivation. Worse, they could invite dreaded [greenwashing](#) accusations.

The Goldilocks strategy of *just right* is difficult to strike but crucial for long-term success.

Don't know where to start? Could you use some inspiration for reasonable goalposts?

Good news! The United Nations (UN) crafted [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDG) broken down into 17 major sustainability areas of focus. Although the SDGs focus on holistic societal goals, they provide a relevant framework for organizations - particularly for businesses operating multi-nationally.

Tying the UN goals into business operations makes sense for a few different reasons. 1) Companies that adopt SDGs orient themselves with international efforts. 2) Doing so legitimizes ambitions with a well-respected global body. 3) The UNSDG website includes useful resources and best practices to aid in the sustainability journey.

Do your homework. Investigate sustainability commitments made by competitors. Can you do better?

Remember, business leaders can always increase goal ambition over time. Early goal attainment boosts morale and builds confidence. For example, meeting an energy reduction goal well ahead of the target date provides fantastic optics. It also builds internal momentum amongst stakeholders for future initiatives.

Frequently extending goal timelines may cause staff to lose interest. Missing goals by a longshot may result in lost motivation.

Before declaring commitments publicly, vet employee reactions in private focus groups. Learn if these goals resonate with your stakeholders before pushing them out. Ensure stakeholders understand the language. Do your goals define intended outcomes in clear terms?

Corporations only get one opportunity to set the initial goalposts. Make sure you're committing the organization to the right hike. After selection, create a campaign to communicate goals throughout the organization and create a plan to meet these long-term goals through incremental steps. Continue reading for examples on how to chart the path forward with strategic roadmapping.

7. Charting the Route: Sustainability Roadmapping

Setting corporate sustainability goals is a great start, but it doesn't stop here. Set your organization up for success by developing a comprehensive roadmap.

A few years ago, my wife and I found ourselves with a week of time off from work and school. We had no plans, no particular destination in mind, and no reservations. We

decided to pack a small bag and hit the open road. Sunshine and adventure were the only thoughts pervading our minds.

We set out from Ohio, meandering through Appalachia, across Virginia, and down to the Carolinas, making it as far as Kitty Hawk, NC. The early spring timeframe afforded days exploring deserted beaches and nearby mountain towns before trekking homeward. The spontaneity provided a fantastic adventure and fond memories.

I'm confident Lewis and Clark felt a similar rush of adventure. The only differences for us were roads, cars, cell phones, and a disorienting amount of roadside food options.

Sweet Home Sustainability

Businesses don't have the luxury of operating in the same carefree manner. Companies must set destinations, identify routes, and contract plans.

Many businesses understand the importance of setting sustainability milestones and have made commitments in the form of long-term goals. (Refer to the previous section.)

However, many of those companies fail to consider the incremental steps required to meet those goals. As a result, companies risk vital resources and their reputation. Herein lies the importance of roadmapping.

A detailed roadmap should accompany any corporate sustainability goal. As an example, let's briefly speak about energy roadmapping.

The Energy Information Administration defines an energy roadmap as a specialized type of strategic plan that outlines activities an organization can undertake over specified time frames to achieve stated goals and outcomes. An effective roadmapping process maximizes engagement in plan creation, thereby building consensus and increasing the likelihood that those involved will implement the roadmap priorities.

Successful roadmaps contain the following elements:

1. **Goals:** Targets to reach desired long-term outcomes established by the organization. *Check-out the previous section for tips to create meaningful corporate sustainability goals.*

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2. **Milestones:** Interim performance targets for reaching stated goals featuring specific dates.
 3. **Gaps and barriers:** A list of potential internal knowledge gaps, adoption barriers, regulatory hurdles, or other obstacles to reaching goals.
 4. **Action items:** Actions identified to overcome barriers that stand in the way of reaching the goals. Actions could include the development of standards or company policies, financial incentives, and public engagement.
 5. **Priorities and timelines:** List the most important actions to achieve the goals in the stated timeframes.

Roadmap Assistance

The roadmap development process comprises four sequential stages: 1) planning and preparation, 2) visioning, 3) roadmap development, and 4) implementation and revision stages.

Planning and Preparation

Establish a steering committee of a few key individuals in the organization. Start by determining a clear scope, intended outcomes, and timeline. Develop energy and environmental data (see articles on baselining and benchmarking). Commit members to meet regularly. Frequent touch points promote idea sharing and identify blind spots and barriers.

Visioning

Analyze future scenarios for energy and environmental impacts from the organization. For example, the analysis could include energy consumption projections based on future load growth. Your team could also decide to analyze resultant applicable scope 1-3 greenhouse gas (GHG) emission projections. For those uninitiated with GHG inventories, check out the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's GHG [webpage](#) to learn more.

If talk of GHG scopes and inventories make you want to take refuge in the crow's nest, we understand. Search for a trusted advisor to help with your GHG analysis.

Roadmap Development

Conduct a workshop with the steering committee and other key stakeholders. Use the time to identify relevant technologies, applicable internal policies, and required timelines. Assess potential contributions of identified technologies to the organization's goals. Technologies could range from energy efficiency opportunities to onsite renewable generation to storage. Include staff engagement strategies for widespread adoption.

Develop a roadmap document and conduct consultation cycles with key stakeholders. Be sure to refine as necessary and share widely across the organization.

Roadmap Implementation and Revision

Monitor and track incremental progress after implementing the roadmap. Continue ongoing steering committee meetings to record progress. Revise the roadmap as new opportunities arise.

An optimally designed roadmap should link any future activity to the roadmap goals. For example, consider the impact of future electric vehicle charging stations on the existing facility's energy consumption. How will EVs impact progress towards the organization's energy reduction targets?

Additional Insurance

To increase the likelihood of success consider and identify resource constraints, critical inputs such as data and technical expertise, roles and responsibilities, and stakeholder participation. For example, assign roles to specific people within departments to assert personal accountability.

Roadmaps should represent the guiding light of any transformational process. For more detailed information, visit the International Energy Agency's detailed [report](#) on energy roadmapping.

After printing the roadmap, it's time to grab the car snacks and put the rubber to the road. This means communicating the goals across the organization. Continue reading for tips communicating the organization's goals through stakeholder engagement.

8. All Hands On Deck: Stakeholder Engagement and Education

Establishing sustainability goals and developing roadmaps is just the beginning. Follow these steps to engage staff and garner buy-in to keep the momentum rolling.

During the pandemic, I planted tomato seeds in a large pot on my patio. After weeks of watering, I was ecstatic one morning to find the first few sprouts emerge from the soil. Over time, it grew into a beautiful plant and produced delicious fruits (or [vegetables?](#)). I even named the newest endearing patio addition: Tommy.

Without the correct ingredients (seeds, water, sunshine, and time) I could not have produced the tomatoes myself. No amount of willpower or coaxing could change this fact.

The same principle applies to companies. Regardless of resources, senior leadership can't will a culture of sustainability into being. It requires key ingredients to earn buy-in.

Let the People Grow

Long-term success requires ongoing sustainability programming and patience for organizational acculturation to take root. Dedicating time to espouse the virtues of sustainability goals to staff is key. Frequent reminders of goals and progress all contribute to widespread adoption over time. Here are a few tips to ensure you're nurturing the seeds of sustainability.

Highlight Progress

Showcase staff contributions towards the sustainability goals to foster a sense of community around sustainability. Celebrate success stories. Disseminate wins across your organization and stakeholders. Highlight case studies on your website. Share one-pagers with customers and the public.

Make it Personal

To garner buy-in, relate the organization's sustainability goals and intended results to employees. Show how the sustainability goals relate to their life.

For example, imagine an organization commits to purchasing 100% clean energy by a future deadline. Highlighting (particularly to parents) the correlation between

fossil-fuel-based generation and reduced childhood asthma rates would prove a strong motivator to support the initiative.

Build personally relatable engagements into regular company processes.

Build Community

We are all social beings. We want to belong. We also want to feel a part of something bigger than ourselves. Share the vision with others. Ask employees what sustainability means to them personally. Connect sustainability to the people it impacts. Invite people to share their stories. It will strengthen bonds between employees and with the organization.

Be Transparent

Communicate openly and regularly on progress towards stated goals. Be proud when ahead of schedule. Use humility and honesty when lagging. Don't sugarcoat it. Your employees will sniff it out, they're smarter than that. Remember, you hired them!

Much like an annual employee review, the evaluation period is never the time to share surprising news. As managers know, regular check-ins with staff throughout the year allow for adjustments, learning, and growth. Sustainability goals are no different. Waiting to share progress until reaching (or missing) a deadline rarely helps anybody.

Provide a platform for staff to submit ideas and share their successes. There's no obligation to act on every suggestion but leaders have an opportunity to prove they're listening and that they value staff input. Continue to thank employees for their valuable feedback.

Be humble. Be kind.

For many, this is the first time incorporating sustainability in a corporate setting. Nobody expects you to have all of the answers so don't feel you have to be that person. And with any company-wide venture, there will always be those who opt out. That's OK. Focus on reaching the masses, not on the few who have other priorities. We aren't aware of everyone's fears, concerns, or stories. Be nice to each other. Move forward with those who are ready and willing to help.

Keep It Up

Remember, building a culture of sustainability takes time. Be patient but assertive. Remember the end goal(s). Don't be afraid to admit when things aren't working and course-correct. Place incentives for staff to contribute to the goals. Setting strong communication channels from the outset will garner buy-in and lead to acceptance over time.

The simple truth is that most [employees value](#) working for sustainable organizations. Building a culture of sustainability is the catalyst for improving brand loyalty, workplace culture, employee satisfaction and retention, and operational efficiency.

Like planting that tomato seed, your hard work will soon begin producing juicy dividends.

9. On the Right Tack: Ongoing Measurement and Evaluation

Measurement and evaluation (M&E) provide businesses with critical data points. Business leaders should follow these tips to gauge progress towards sustainability goals, understand trends, and save money.

It's the final stretch. We've performed the hard work of baselining, benchmarking, goal development, and roadmap implementation. Now it's time for the easy, yet crucial, part — measuring progress!

Much like tracking financials, ongoing measurement and evaluation (M&E) offers critical insights. M&E helps business leaders understand the impact of individual sustainability initiatives and track progress towards long-term goals. It can also offer insights needed for informed adjustments to their sustainability roadmaps.

Tracking progress also supports transparency. Use data to link personal actions to energy or resource consumption. Share results. Remember, people generally want to do the right thing if convenient enough. Help them see the positive contributions resulting from their actions. Make it easier for them to choose to save.

Behavior-Nudging

Humans are curiously competitive creatures. Most of us recognize that humans often abandon logic after involving emotions. No matter how trivial, people go bananas for the opportunity to compete with another human being. Have you ever watched someone drop \$60 at a fair to win a stuffed animal they could have purchased for \$15? Put this bit of behavioral science to work for your (and your company's) advantage.

Link individual actions to outcomes. Introduce friendly competition in support of your sustainability initiatives. Offer small prizes for the winning people or teams. For example, some organizations host friendly energy efficiency competitions across different departments or buildings. Be creative.

If your organization cannot disaggregate energy consumption by department or building, don't dismay. You can dangle the appeal of a celebration for reaching company-wide energy efficiency targets. Sustainability-related competitions illustrate employees can maintain a high quality of life while using fewer resources. And it can even be fun! When people understand their impact, they'll often find the gamification enthralling.

The best practitioners understand sustainability isn't something organizations do. It's part of doing business. Changing organizational culture isn't easy. It won't happen overnight, but keep that M&E train rolling. Be creative. Remain resilient, stay focused on the end-goals, and keep at it! The results may surprise you.

Final Salvos: Staying the Course

Stakeholder acceptance and adoption are essential to any successful corporate sustainability program. Here are some tips to start earning buy-in and gaining interest in sustainability at your organization.

Building Greatness

We spend a lot of time in buildings. We're born in them, live in them, and generally prefer to sleep in them. Perhaps you're reading from inside a building at this very moment! A famous 2001 [Lawrence Berkely National Lab study](#) found Americans spend 87% of their lives indoors!

We humans sure do love our beloved built infrastructure, and rightly so. But did you know our buildings consume nearly [40% of all U.S. energy?](#)

That's a lot of energy! How much? Energy nerds tell us U.S. buildings consume 21 Quadrillion British Thermal Units (Btu) annually.

21,000,000,000,000,000 Btus. That's right, 15 zeros. But what does that even mean, in English?

A Btu is a measure of energy. One Btu is roughly equal to the heat released by burning a single match. So U.S. buildings consume the energy-equivalent of burning 21 quadrillion matches. **Every year.**

Conserving Some Coin

So, buildings are often ripe with energy savings opportunities. Any sustainability crusader is smart to start with energy conservation and efficiency.

Of course, plenty of onsite generation options exist like solar PV. But energy professionals are quick to remind of the "reduce, then produce" philosophy. It's easier and less expensive to reduce energy consumption **before** investing in on-site generation.

Here are some quick tips to gain momentum and earn some quick wins in your sustainability journey.

Does your organization own its facilities? Has it been over five years since the last energy audit? If so, put audits at the top of the list. Audits are useful, low-cost assessments that can identify slam dunk energy projects. Audits also establish building baseline energy consumption metrics. *Who doesn't love a two-for-one?*

Engineer some quick wins for early traction. First projects should be easy to implement with high success rates. Boost that confidence by identifying "low-hanging fruit" projects. Popular first topics include lighting retrofits, thermostat setpoint adjustments or scheduling, motor replacements to variable frequency drives (VFD), and good old-fashioned recycling.

Look Well Into Thyself

Highlight initiatives already underway. Facilities staff will be highly knowledgeable on this topic. Ask staff about ongoing projects in an initial staff survey. Ask HR or your marketing team if they'll help support your mission to save the company money (how can you say no to that!).

Remember: Investments + Accomplishments = Wins.

Share and celebrate wins across the organization. Recognize individuals through their actions or ideas towards sustainability. Be generous with congratulations. Remember, symbolism matters, particularly early on.

As previously mentioned, create a "Green Team" if one doesn't already exist. The team will prove a vital internal bellwether and valuable agents. Green teams can help garner ideas, communicate progress, and advocate for sustainability initiatives throughout the organization. For example, be sure to leverage the group to support sustainability proposals. Many signatories will offer a stronger project endorsement than a sole author. Decision-makers will notice. It makes getting to yes easier when they see support from other respected colleagues.

Identify and invite sustainability champions in the organization to get involved. If a green team already exists, help them find a champion among senior leadership or the executive team.

When reporting progress, use terms that relate to employees. For example, most people don't think in kilowatt-hours. But they can relate to their home. Use domestic equivalents for water or energy references. For example, refer to the water or energy required for 1,000 homes, not gallons or kilowatt-hours.

Out to Open Water

Turning your company's ship towards a sustainable future requires an all-hands-on-deck effort. Your staff is busy and most businesses are scant on resources to get their crew into ship-shape.

Like Magellan's explorations, many business leaders label corporate sustainability as scary, uncharted territory. For myriad reasons, organizations are wise to cautiously ponder the

journey. When you're ready, Solutions in Sustainability exists to help your business safely co-pilot the sustainability schooner.

Solutions in Sustainability understands the needs and challenges that companies face around sustainability. We specialize in assisting clients with any of the elements detailed in this report, from strategic energy roadmaps that align with organizational sustainability goals to stakeholder engagement and education programs. We lead internal staff "Green Teams" that align with corporate strategy and offer busy teams experienced technical resources.

Are you ready to chart your sustainability journey? Could you use help creating the right sustainability goals for your organization? [Contact Solutions in Sustainability](#) today to share your long-term vision. We want to help identify the right Solutions in Sustainability for you.

About the Author

[Alex Kaufman](#) is a science communicator, clean energy specialist, sustainability nerd, professional engineer, travel enthusiast, and resident of San Diego, California. When not helping clients, you can usually find him cycling, hiking, reading, spending time with loved ones, or planning the next big adventure. He is open to speaking engagements. Contact him at alex@alexkaufmanpe.com or through [LinkedIn](#).