

Eight tips for getting your sustainability project off the ground

This piece focuses on in-the-trenches advice for new sustainability directors at companies just getting started on implementing a sustainability strategy.

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1. Look at the big picture and identify your company's greatest impacts. Review your key business operations to understand the key environmental issues for your business and the opportunities and risks presented by these issues. Alex McIntosh, Director of Corporate Citizenship at Nestlé Waters, advises new directors to "think broadly about what sustainability means to your business, look beyond your four walls, up and down your full value chain." Then," he continues, "quantify your impacts [green house gas (GHG) emissions or life cycle assessment (LCA) or tons of waste] and prioritize the places where your impacts are the greatest. Pay lots of attention to how people inside the company are being rewarded or penalized for their performance in those areas."

2. Land some quick wins -- go for cost savings. To start, prioritize and focus on capturing the low-hanging fruit. Look for opportunities that will deliver results quickly, such as increasing efficiency and reducing waste. Scan your business and look for logical opportunities to save money and develop measurable metrics to track results.

3. Be authentic. If you are going to use sustainability as a product differentiator, be sure you have done all you can to be authentically green. This does not mean you have to be perfect. Consumers want honesty and transparency, not perfection. But with today's social media tools, it only takes a moment on Twitter for someone to accuse you of greenwashing.

4. Develop internal partners. For directors getting started, begin to network throughout the company and create relationships with directors who oversee key functions, including product design, procurement, sales, supply chain, governmental affairs, social investment, analyst relations and employee engagement. Look for opportunities to gain their trust and educate them on the value sustainability offers the company, including product differentiation that can capture market share and drive top-line revenues.

5. Engage your stakeholders. McIntosh suggests meeting with as many people as you can outside of your company, "prioritizing to meet with the most influential and interested stakeholders first."

"Stakeholder engagement is an important, essential element in good citizenship and good business strategy. You need to know what issues are most important to the people that are most relevant to your business," suggests McIntosh.

Include your supply chain, customers, investors and employees in your outreach so you can understand what leadership looks like or what risks may be coming. What issues do they care about? What is important to them? How are they tackling their end of the equation? Answers to these questions can help inform your strategy and programs.

6. Engage employees. If you are short on resources to implement new programs, look to your employees. Bonnie Nixon, Director of Environmental Sustainability at Hewlett Packard, explained that the company engages employees on multiple levels, ranging from providing them energy kits to reduce their personal carbon footprint at home to offering incentives for biking to work to encouraging them to innovate more and find ways to imbed sustainability into product design, the supply chain and the sales process.

7. Develop a communications strategy. A key component to a sustainability program is communicating both internally and externally about your efforts and results. Develop a strategy that details how you are going to communicate your efforts -- both your successes and future areas for improvement.

8. Develop a long-term strategy. Going green does not happen overnight. Hunter Lovins, the president and founder of Natural Capitalism Solutions warns, "avoid the temptation to be green all at once. This is a years long process, like continuous improvement."

Bonnie Nixon adds, "in addition to a short-term strategy, you need to develop a longer term plan that looks at potential trends and regulations out there and what your future customer segment is going to look like."

Ultimately, you want to aim for an authentic strategy that is linked to your company's mission, vision, brand and values that will deliver significant, quantifiable, bottom-line results.

Source: GreenBiz.com