

**Building bridges
to create a
sustainable
future**



Any organisational shift inevitably requires change to processes, behaviours and how individuals and functions interact with each other.

While the idea of working for a sustainable business is becoming increasingly important for many employees, ensuring this sustainability vision becomes a reality is often easier said than done for the organisations concerned.

But it is here that the often-underestimated discipline of change management comes in. Any organisational shift inevitably requires change to processes, behaviours and how individuals and functions interact with each other.

Nowhere is this more true than in a sustainability context where to effect real and, yes, sustainable change is a company-wide endeavour. Unless everyone at all levels of the organisation work together and are on board with the plans, outcomes will be piecemeal at best and the overall impact will be limited.

In other words, change management may not be top of most leaders' minds when embarking on such an initiative, not least because the scope of the sustainability agenda is significant and can seem overwhelming. But it does have a pivotal role to play if you want to bring employees along with you through the transition.

A key challenge in this context is that many people fear change with its countless unknowns and uncertainties. A Gartner survey highlighted the rising phenomenon of change fatigue among employees, due to which their willingness to support organisational change is decreasing. According to data, 74% of employees were willing to facilitate change in 2016, whereas only 38% are on board with supporting change in 2022.

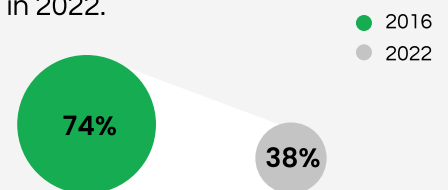


Figure 1. Employees willingness to support change

Employees may be unsure about whether they can get to grips with the new proposals or be afraid of not doing as good a job as in the past. This situation all too often translates into resistance and pushback, which are common reasons behind project failure.



Creating a desire for change

So, the secret to success here is creating a desire for change. It is possible to do this by being crystal clear about your strategy and goals. The point is that if you are unable to say where you are going, what you intend to do, how you intend to do it or why, how can you hope to bring people with you?

Another vital but all too frequently forgotten consideration is explaining what change will mean for individuals. This involves exploring what behaviours, skills and knowledge will be required in their changing roles and what help they will be offered to acquire them.



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Other key questions include what people will need to do differently on a day-to-day basis and how this shift will be positive for them, the business, society and the planet.

The idea is that if they understand why change needs to occur and are clear that it will work for them rather than against them, they are far more likely to support it. Simply involving people in the process can likewise make a huge difference by generating engagement and interest. Also useful in this context is introducing reward and recognition systems that are aligned with, and bolster, sustainability goals. Doing so helps to reinforce positive behaviour and ensure it becomes embedded across the wider organisational culture.

But company culture also has an important role to play in other ways too. For example, in more traditional, hierarchical cultures, organisations may well encounter varying degrees of resistance. This is where a clear, two-way communications strategy comes into its own.

On the other hand, organisations that are agile and flexible in approach will usually find it easier to get employees on board. In this instance, change management will need to focus on coordinating activity and helping to break down functional silos.

Five tips to create a desire for change in your organisation

- 01 Communicate clear strategy & goals
- 02 Explain the individual implications of change
- 03 Provide help and support tools to ease change
- 04 Clarify what positive outcome is expected
- 05 Introduce reward and recognition systems

Implementing change management

Interestingly though, many companies already undertake ad hoc elements of change management without even realising they are doing so.

But making the process more conscious, well thought-through and consistent can help turn it further to your advantage.

Otherwise, it can be easy to miss key points and issues, causing initiatives to backfire and potentially do more harm than good. Bearing in mind that the objectives and requirements of each organisation will inevitably be different, a good place to start when embarking on a sustainability initiative is to ask yourself some basic questions.

These include the reasons for undertaking the project in the first place, your aims in doing so and what the strategy for achieving these aims will look like. To understand whether your organisational culture is likely to support or hinder these goals, it also makes sense to examine the values and beliefs that underpin it.

The insights gained from answering such questions will help inform your change management approach going forward.

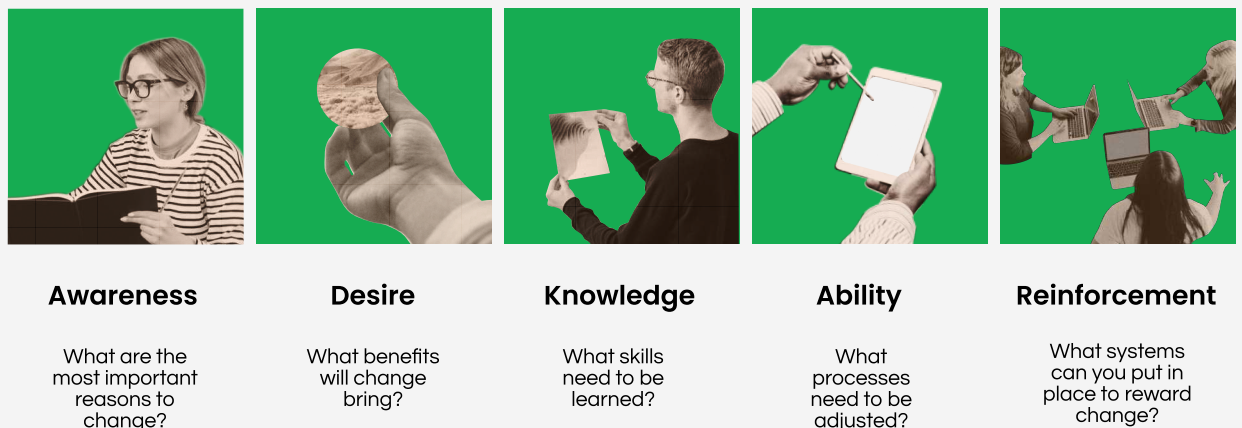
But the work does not stop there. Just as important is to understand your employee skills base and the expertise that will be required to undertake your sustainability project. This includes exploring where any gaps exist and whether it would be more efficient and effective to fill them by up-skilling or recruitment.

Next on the list are structure-based considerations. For example, where would any change team sit within the organisation? Would this choice make it easy to coordinate activity on a company-wide basis or could the team end up being siloed? What new systems and processes will be necessary, and which change management methodology is the best one for the job?

One very useful tool here is the ADKAR Change Management Model as it puts the focus on employees being the ones to drive change.

But there are plenty of others, all of which are equally valid depending on where you currently are on your sustainability journey. There are no right or wrong answers here.

Figure 2.
ADKAR Change
Management
Model



Tackling sustainability more holistically

However, because the scale of the sustainability challenge can seem so huge, it may understandably feel somewhat overwhelming. The environmental side alone includes subjects, such as decarbonisation, waste management, and water and air pollution.

The social side covers everything from human rights issues in your supply chain to employee career management. Ethical business conduct is another consideration. Key topics here include anti-corruption and data protection practices.

As a result, sustainability is what is known as a 'wicked' problem.

Its complexity means that any action taken to tackle it can have both intended and unintended consequences, with different impacts being felt by different groups of people. This scenario can lead to paralysis as organisations become afraid to take action due to potential, unforeseen implications. Another challenge is that because sustainability issues are so interconnected, they are often hard to map. As a result, many organisations find themselves unsure where to start on their journey.

A good place to begin though is with a materiality assessment. This can help you identify and prioritise which topics are most important for the business to deal with first. If a full assessment sounds daunting, industry-based benchmarks, such as the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board or MCSI ESG Ratings, identify potentially relevant topics to think about. However, the secret to success is in starting small and scaling your efforts up as time goes on.

You don't have to build the entire bridge all at once – just focus on the foundations and move forward from there.

Once you feel more confident, systems thinking can be a useful tool to help you see your situation in a more holistic fashion. It will also enable you to map how different topics and actions relate to, and impact, each other.

Moving forward, these tips can help you implementing change within your organisation in a seamless way:



Figure 3. Three shifts to facilitate change



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About Viktoria Vero



Viktoria Vero leads the Sustainability Advisory team at Nexio Projects, which is based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Before becoming a sustainability expert, she focused on international development and consulting for 15 years in the fields of change management, organisational development, and process improvement. With a BA in Economic Diplomacy and International Management from Budapest Business University and an MSc in International Development Studies from Utrecht University, Viktoria has worked with a wide variety of organisations. These include fast-scaling companies, large corporations, NGOs, international development agencies and academic institutions. Here she led numerous organisational development and change projects, experiencing the challenges and successes of each first-hand. She joined Nexio Projects in 2021.

Get in touch

About Nexio Projects

Nexio Projects is an international sustainability consultant and implementation specialist that supports a wide range of customers on their journey from compliance to purpose. Nexio Projects differentiates itself through strong partnerships with the world's leading ESG service providers such as EcoVadis, its pragmatic and human customer approach, and its unique team culture that attracts and retains the best international talent globally.

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