BUILDING A SUSTAINABILITY AMBASSADOR NETWORK

FOSTERING THE CHAMPIONS WHO TAKE ORGANIZATIONS BEYOND BUSINESS AS USUAL
INTRODUCTION

Whether catalyzed by global agreements, changes in local regulation, or the rising expectations of external stakeholders and consumers, the calls to action for firms to address the issues of environmental, social, and economic sustainability have grown louder. For some, too loud to ignore.

While improving operational efficiencies and celebrating Earth Day are important, how firms engage their employees to work together on sustainability initiatives is crucial for the entire value chain.

Employees are natural ambassadors who traverse departments and seniority levels, interact with all outward-facing stakeholders, and therefore should be involved in driving a firm’s sustainability efforts. By developing a network of sustainability ambassadors, firms will have greater capacity to drive the awareness and engagement needed to catalyze the implementation of programs and externally promote success. For many firms, particularly global firms, that have highly centralized structures, developing ambassadors can be an uncomfortable process at the start, but it is only through the engagement of their markets that firms can ultimately understand the issues that are being faced, develop tangible and actionable strategies, and help employees move from inspiration to action.

Through this report, we aim to support executives as they seek to develop this network and ultimately realize these outcomes for their firms. The following sections will convey the business case for ambassadors, explore different ambassador archetypes, examine case studies and provide advice for building an effective ambassador program.

We hope that this report can inspire you to act, and serve as a comprehensive guide as your firm looks to develop strategy to capitalise on the ever growing business opportunity within sustainability.

Sustainability Ambassador
[noun. 1/ A passionate individual who aspires to create a more economically, socially and environmentally resilient world by engaging and inspiring others 2/ A corporate change-maker who produces and promotes solutions to improve business innovation and sustainability performance 3/ A Social Intrapreneur]
Before a firm can champion sustainability, it must first champion the potential of their employees, understand the value of ambassadors and the process of leveraging them.

Each step of this process can unlock new value for the firm.

Awareness is about identifying and encouraging those who can catalyze a culture of sustainability. Engagement sees ambassadors as those who then bring value from internal and external stakeholder activities. Action is tangible follow-through, which often poses the most challenging step, but ambassadors can turn challenges into opportunities, driving continuous innovation. Gaining traction from these steps, scaling sustainability sees ambassadors as network builders, creating long-lasting and far-reaching impact.

From an ambitious sustainability ambassador strategy and comprehensive process, the results can be truly game-changing.
Awareness

The first step towards action, be it for the passionate sustainability professional or the quarterly focused executive to be aware of key issues, trends, and the concerns of stakeholders, which is why one of the greatest responsibilities of an ambassador is to create awareness about the challenges that a firm faces.

Ambassadors are the hub of knowledge to be tapped into, and it is (should be) through them that stakeholders gain awareness about their own exposures, effective strategies are created and processes begin which move the firm from passive compliance towards action.

Engagement

Once awareness of the challenge, or the opportunity, is there, the next step towards action is engagement, and this is one of the ambassador’s most critical functions. Be it through poster campaigns, one-on-ones, annual reports, or speaking at events.

Internally, ambassadors who are able to effectively engage others are more effective at identifying and aligning the resources needed to mitigate the risks or develop out the opportunities.

Externally, ambassadors should be focused on meeting with industry peers, customers, suppliers, non-profits, and government agencies to educate them about the firm’s positions and programs as well as absorb insights and knowledge that can be brought back into the firm.

Action

It is only with a stable base of active ambassadors executing on the vision, strategy, and programs, that change is truly possible for it is through them that action can take place. This is particularly in the early days, when outcomes are uncertain.

It will be the passion of the ambassador that will lead them to take on the additional workload, develop programs on a bootstrap, and drive towards a positive result. Actions which they hope will result in a larger allocation of resources, and wider engagement.

Why ambassadors are particularly well suited for this is that they often see the challenge, and associated risks, as part of their mandate. Particularly if it requires changing a system, solving an issue, or developing a new market opportunity.

Scale

Ifrms looking to take their vision of sustainability forward to scale, the development of an effective ambassador or group of ambassadors will be one of the most effective mediums by which initiatives move from pilot to the system level; from a single city program to a regional one.

At the same time, through their ability to engage others, they will bring together the resources needed to take initiatives across departments, value chains, and industries by training the next generation of ambassadors, create a culture that spans the organization, and showcase the impacts of their business model for sustainability.
Building A Sustainability Ambassador Network

SUSTAINABILITY AMBASSADORS
ARCHETYPES

NEW ENTRANT

MOTIVATIONS
The New Entrant wants to work for a “good” brand that aligns with their values and sees the firm as a medium to build relevant experience and drive change. They are always looking for ways to participate in initiatives, show their capabilities to others, and gain access to leadership. They are energized by what can be accomplished and want to start making a difference immediately.

CAPACITY FOR CHANGE
On their own, they have limited capacity to affect change and are often relied on to “do the work” in a larger group. Yet as part of the ambassador network, they exude the energy that drives bottom-up change processes. As an organizer, they will have the time and passion to continue engaging willing partners, but may struggle to engage those who are not interested or aligned.

LIMITATIONS
The low stature of the New Entrant creates a challenge in engaging stakeholders, especially senior management. Without buy-in at the top, budgets and size of impact will be limited. Additionally, any efforts made might be constrained by the fact they already have a “job” they are being paid for.

PASSIONATE PROFESSIONAL

MOTIVATIONS
The Passionate Professional is motivated by the personal tangibility presented by an issue they are trying to solve. They are aware of how the business operates and the constraints it poses but they have not lost their aspirations for real change. They have gained a measure of seniority which makes them feel confident in taking on challenges. As an insider, they are inspired to bring change to the organization.

CAPACITY FOR CHANGE
They can be limited if their position within the firm is reduced to the label of “greenie” or if current responsibilities are seen as non-core. As a result, it may require extra work to convince superiors before action can take place. In order to do so, leveraging networks of peers and building coalitions becomes a key influential factor.

LIMITATIONS
Departmental friction in cross-organizational projects often challenges Passionate Professionals who seek to build bridges. They are challenged by systems they cannot unilaterally change and budgets they cannot control. Current job constraints like time and job expectations are a limiting factor as well, but their determination and stamina bring them success.
The job and motivation for the Sustainability Executive is to cultivate a culture that aligns with the organization’s sustainability vision. They are motivators and mentors who inspire and guide other ambassadors in the work they do. They are measured by their progress regularly and need to show the success of the ambassador network program.

**Motivations**

The Visionary sees creating restorative organizations as the new business model and sees their personal legacy attached to the change that can be affected by this model. The changes they envision are at the systems level, both now and into the future, so they are motivated to engage lower ranks who will eventually replace them.

**Capacity for Change**

Their capacity for change within the firm is high, particularly in good economic times. They have an ability to make decisions, delegate responsibility, and manage and measure others who are carrying out the work. They also have a capacity for change outside the firm, they are considered an industry leader. Change will grow if stakeholders, including competitors, are convinced by business case.

**Limitations**

Without executive support, programs may appear tacked on instead of intertwined within company strategy, failing to create systems change. Economic conditions may also limit or slow executive interest in change which will impact available funding.

The Visionary may be limited by a lack of detailed knowledge or recent “hands on” at ground-level operations. Internally, challenges can emerge from engaging others on issues and catalyzing behavior change. Externally, challenges can emerge from the Board of Directors or investors who may still need to be sold on the sustainability vision.

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**THE VISIONARY**

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TIPS FOR BUILDING A SUSTAINABILITY AMBASSADOR NETWORK

Given the fact that each ambassador program needs to reflect the values and goals of the firm, and help move the sustainability strategy forward, it is important for there to be a process to support the successful design, development, and execution of the ambassador program itself.

When done well, this will allow the firm to develop not just a strong core of ambassadors, but will help it to execute on its sustainability goals, change the organization’s culture, and put itself in the position to call itself a leader of sustainability in their industry. When done poorly, the movement can lose momentum, ambassadors can be left searching for meaning in their work, and ultimately the organization may be left with an unfulfilled strategy.

1. START SMALL
CREATE A SMALL TEAM WITH A WELL DEFINED MISSION

The size of the team should be manageable, yet large enough that varying perspectives, departments and skill sets can contribute to the mission of the network, but not so large that it becomes difficult to coordinate human resources. At the same time, the scope of the team and programs should be proportionate its capacity.

Be ambitious in the ability to build future capacity, but realistic in that scale will only come through the series of incremental successes and engagements.

2. ENGAGE & EDUCATE
YOUR COMPANY’S LEADERS & SUSTAINABILITY TEAM THROUGH MULTIPLE CHANNELS

Send out emails, publish newsletters and host meetings at regular intervals to inform and remind your organization that sustainability is an ongoing priority. Promote a deeper understanding of sustainability to potential ambassadors by using experiential learning opportunities.

Build partnerships on the inside to ensure that a diverse range of departments, opinions and viewpoints are being engaged. Build partnerships on the outside as well, developing relationships with industry organizations, cross-sector consortia, consulting firms or NGOs with the same sustainability agenda will help you along the way.
On a regular basis, be it through employee newsletters, internal websites, or awards, firms need to recognize and reward the work being done by their ambassadors as a way to celebrate their success and to encourage others to join. Through this process of recognizing their work, it will not only ensure that the ambassadors themselves remain engaged, but will be a primary means by which others will learn about initiatives, programs, and how they can join the team.

If you give people the opportunity to grow themselves professionally and personally through mentorship and taking on sustainability-oriented projects, it will enhance their leadership qualities and help them become successful corporate change-makers.

When looking for ways to empower your ambassadors, it is important to remember that ensuring they have contact and recognition from senior management is a significant source of motivation. Not only from a visibility perspective, but just in knowing that the work they are doing is valued at the top of the organization and not some nice to have.

As more people become engaged with the sustainability ambassador network, don’t be afraid to let it flourish by giving ambassadors the autonomy to take risks and develop their own ideas.

Allowing employees to individually and collectively build programs that are important to them is one of the fastest ways for business-aligned sustainability strategies to scale. At first, this may mean that the goals and objectives of executive leadership may not be seen as a priority, but these goals will not be a priority if the same staff are disengaged. It’s better to take the long road to scale, if it means progress is driven and sustained by a wider cultural shift.
Building A Sustainability Ambassador Network

CASE STUDY
ROLE OF THE VISIONARY
RAY ANDERSON, INTERFACE

CHANGE OF VISION
Ray Anderson's change of vision started with a phone call that Interface had just lost a large piece of business in California for not having an environmental position. In response to this loss, a committee was built and during the course of preparing for the kick off speech, Anderson read Paul Hawken's book The Ecology of Commerce - a book making the case that natural systems are in decline and that business is in the best position to reverse the trend. To do otherwise would be a crime, and that in his mind would lead to his conviction as a plunderer of the Earth.

Ray had an epiphany that fundamentally changing his perspective on the role of business, and inspiring him to create "Mission Zero"- a plan to take Interface towards eliminating all negative impacts on the environment.


7 FRONTS OF SUSTAINABILITY
To support their vision, Interface created a series of seven fronts to measure progress, engage stakeholders, and ultimately support the completion of mission.

1. Eliminate Waste
2. Benign Emissions
3. Renewable Energy
4. Closed Loop Material Flows
5. Resource Efficient Transport
6. Engage Stakeholders
7. Redesign Commerce

450M USD SAVED SINCE 1998

* All figures are Per Unit of Production

I once told a Fortune magazine writer that someday people like me would go to jail. (...) I offered that theft is a crime, and theft of our children's future would someday be a crime. I, there must be a clear, demonstrable alternative to the take-make-waste industrial system that so dominates our civilization, and is the major culprit, stealing our children's future, by digging up the earth and converting it to products that quickly become waste in a landfill or an incinerator.

Ray Anderson
Founder of Interface Inc.

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Founder of Interface Inc.
An ambassador network has the ability to create a true culture of sustainability within a firm, driving innovation, building better stakeholder relationships, reducing costs, creating value and ultimately developing a company brand synonymous with responsible business.

However, achieving these results requires a firm to develop a transformative sustainability ambassador network, and doing this requires an understanding and appreciation for the heart of every organization: its people - who represent potential ambassadors and whose motivations, capacities for change and limitations all play important and interdependent roles in a firm’s sustainability journey.

Each ambassador program will of course look different to reflect the particular values and goals of the firm, and while there is no one-size-fits-all solution for developing an effective sustainability ambassador program, there are certainly best practices, case studies and processes from which companies can build their strategy.

We hope this guide helped get you started with developing your first generation of ambassadors, their first meeting and first proposal to senior management.

Given the size, scope, and scale of the challenges, the need to create a foundation of sustainability ambassadors to drive organizational culture, identify areas of risk, and take advantage of opportunities to create markets for the solutions has never been greater.

With that, we hope that we have inspired you to take the first steps. To find ways to engage, and empower, members of your team to come together for their first meeting and develop the framework for what will ultimately become your own sustainability ambassador program.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

PAPERS AND REPORTS
• Creating Sustainable Business Through Social Intrapreneurism
• Embedding Sustainability in Organizational Culture, A How-to Guide for Executives
• Making the Pitch: Selling Sustainability From Inside Corporate America
• The Social Intrapreneur, A Field Guide for Corporate Changemakers
• The Sustainability Executive: Profile and Progress September 2012

BOOKS
• Confessions of a Radical Industrialist
• Let my People Go Surfing
• The Sustainability Champion’s Guidebook: How to Transform Your Company

NETWORKS, ORGANIZATIONS & COMMUNITIES
• Centre for Sustainability and Excellence
• CSR Training Institute
• League of Intrapreneurs
• One4all CSR
• Sustainability Professionals LinkedIn Group

BLOGS
• Ecopreneurist Blog
• edouardstenger
• Ideal Worldsmiths Blog
• Inspired Economist
• Mallen Baker’s Respectful Business Blog
• Sense & Sustainability
• State of the Planet
• SustainAbility Blog
• Sustainability = Smart Business

PODCASTS
• CSRLive.in
• Greenbiz
• INNOV8SOCIAL
• Stanford Social Innovation Review
• The Guardian
• The Respectful Business Podcast
• The Voices of Social Change Podcast