

How to motivate teams to take more climate action

Who this resource is for

Sustainability professionals who want to mobilise the rest of the organisation towards getting to net zero

Employees who might not work in sustainability but are taking on sustainability-related projects and initiatives within the company.

About WorkforClimate

WorkforClimate is a not-for-profit on a mission to accelerate the climate transformation of companies by leveraging their most powerful assets: employees. WorkforClimate helps employees who are convinced of the need to act urgently on climate, convince others to do the same.

[Find out more about WorkforClimate](#)

Introduction

If you ask a sustainability professional what their number 1 challenge is – aside from, you know, the climate crisis – you’ll often hear that it’s getting the team on-board, or sometimes more specifically getting the teams to implement the right actions.



Because while many people are on board in theory, there are a lot of obstacles that can get in the way of action.

The reality is that no sustainability team – or even management team – can get its company to net zero alone. The ability of the head of sustainability/ sustainability manager to be successful in their role and achieve climate goals of the company largely relies on their ability to sell climate action internally and to motivate all employees to act in their departments.

In other words, the ultimate goal is to get your company from a state in which climate is the sustainability team's job, to a state in which everyone is involved in the transformation to net zero.



Sounds good – but how do we get there? This guide will show you how.

The main challenges to getting teams to take more climate action

Let's start with the obstacles standing in the way.



Challenge 1

You need to pitch climate action to stakeholders:

- Pitch up to decision makers to convince them to agree to implement strong targets and deliver on them
- Pitch across to other teams you rely on for the success of your sustainability plans.

Challenge 2

Sustainability professionals are historically mostly technical experts. So they need to develop new skills:

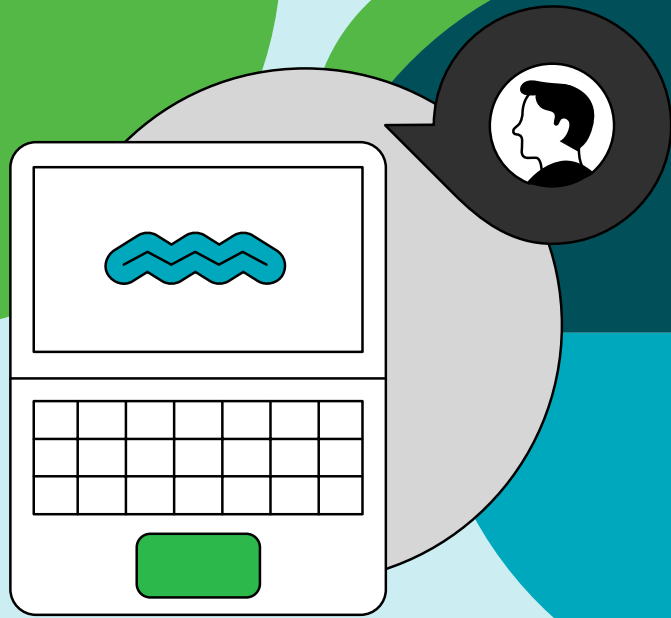
- Leadership and influencing skills
- Become stronger communicators and translators of climate action

Challenge 3

Embedding a sustainable mindset and practices in every part of an organisation requires organisational changes. This typically falls outside of the remit of sustainability teams. Sustainability professionals shouldn't be expected to carry this themselves.

Challenge 4

The work of getting teams on board – however essential – comes on top of all other responsibilities sustainability managers are in charge of. So time is a challenge. And if sustainability isn't part of your core role, then it's even more challenging, plus you may not even get proper recognition for doing this important work.



If you're a sustainability manager

The role of a sustainability manager has evolved significantly over the past few years from being a subject matter expert to so much more. To be successful in the role, you now need to be a great strategist, as well as an effective communicator and influencer.

Sound like a lot? The good news is that we're here to help.

It's helpful to think of the sustainability manager role as the conductor of an orchestra. Both roles set a vision and direction, then coordinate efforts and ensure all stakeholders and employees across the organisation are aligned and working in harmony.

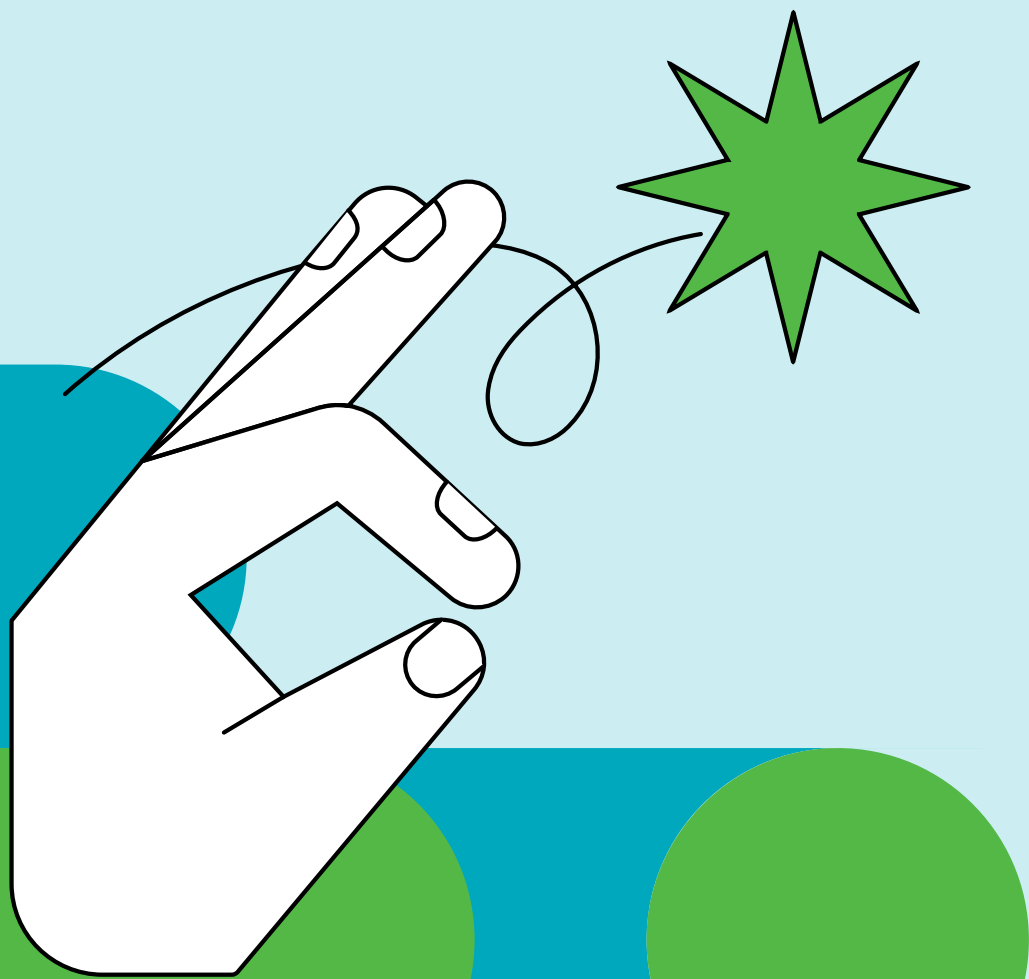
This evolution of role and responsibilities is causing companies to rethink where sustainability sits in the organisation. The most progressive companies are working to break down organisational silos that have made it so difficult in the past to achieve sustainability goals.

In an ideal situation, your role as the sustainability manager would include thought leadership, strategy, setting goals, providing technical expertise, reporting on progress, and ensuring resources are available to make changes. From there, the actual work needs to get done in every other area of the business.

The takeaway here for sustainability professionals is that they need to find ways to make teams from every other function feel like they can get things done.

To do this, we propose a 3-step guide. At the centre of the 3 steps sits a novel idea of an employee-led climate action group which acts as an extension of the sustainability team and supports its mission. It spreads ownership and accountability for sustainability across the organisation.

A 3-step guide to get teams on-board with climate action



Step 1: Build momentum and find allies

Your initial goal is to build momentum around climate action at the company and find your allies. You want to find the people outside of your team who care enough to take action and support you to introduce actions or push for a more ambitious climate agenda.

First, consider your current situation. How often is climate discussed within the organisation?

One way to find allies is to conduct one-on-ones with others in the organisation. You might feel outside of your comfort zone, but it's well worth it – you might be surprised about how many people care and are ready to support you.

CONDUCTING CLIMATE ONE-ON-ONES

In your one-on-one, let the other person do most of the talking. Ask about any personal connections to the climate crisis, their background, interests, and world views. Your objective is to establish trust and rapport and learn a bit more about why and how they might be motivated to support you in advocating for climate action at work.

Be curious and listen deeply; what is important to them, and what experiences and stories have led them to where they are today? Try to find out what might be motivating them to tackle the climate crisis. Do they have young children? Do they have a special connection with a location that is particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events? Knowing these things will help you connect with them on a deeper level.

[More tips for conversations](#)

SHARE YOUR OWN PERSONAL STORY

This might help to break down barriers and encourage the other person to open-up. Just make sure you don't overtake the discussion.

WHAT'S YOUR CLIMATE STORY?

Stories are powerful. One of the most effective ways to establish trust, rapport, and connection with others is by leveraging the power of storytelling and by demonstrating vulnerable, human dimensions of the problem.

Sharing stories with each other helps spark and build strong relationships. And strong relationships are key to getting hard things done.

Here are a few prompts you can use to create or fine-tune your personal climate story:

- When did you start caring about climate? And why?
- Are you a parent or grandparent? Or maybe you want to be one someday?
- Where do you live? Is your home or community vulnerable to intensifying storms, flooding, wildfires, heatwaves, drought, or sea level rise?
- How might the planetary emergency put your industry or livelihood at risk?

Write down your thought process and any a-ha moments along the way. Look for all the ways climate impacts who you are, where you're from, what you do, and what you care about.

And then work this into your climate story and conversations. Your story will be far more personal and relatable. Meaning it will be more effective than any fact sheet, report, chart or climate statistics.

One helpful tactic to find allies in the organisation is to create an attractor – find a honey pot to attract the bees! That could mean hosting a lunch or after-hours networking event for colleagues interested in sustainability, bringing a speaker in, or hosting a documentary screening.

What will your attractor be?

Find potential ideas and resources you can use to build initial momentum and find allies.

Step 2: Start a movement

Once you have some initial momentum and you've identified potential allies in the organisation, your goal is to build on it and maintain it on the longer term.

To succeed in realising the vision of a company where everyone is actively involved in and committed to reaching net zero, you will need to take the climate topic outside the bubble of the core sustainability team or committee, if you have one of these, and bring it to every corner of the company. Easier said than done, right?

One way to make this happen is to enable an employee-led climate action group. An employee-led climate action group is not the same as a green team, or at least most green teams we've come across.

One issue with most green teams is that while they are run by people who truly care, they often end up being side-lined and left in charge of initiatives like introducing a recycling program or organising an ocean clean-up day. Both are great initiatives, but they have little to do with the core business.

One employee from a company in the WorkforClimate community said:

“We probably reached the end of the road when we started to pursue initiatives that required more ‘buy in’ from the business. Looking back, I think there was a structural piece in terms of aligning more with the business as opposed to running a side show that was perhaps perceived more like a charity.”

An employee-climate action group is different: it's a structured initiative, supported by senior managers, that works in close partnership with the sustainability team, if you have one, to help get your organisation to net zero.

The employee climate action group does not replace the sustainability team – it's an extension of it. It supports it, complements it, and overall helps achieve progress faster.

The employee climate action group has representatives from various parts of the organisation and makes sure every voice is heard. It can also collaborate with external stakeholders, such as industry groups, peers from other companies in the sector, not-for-profit organisations, etc.

You, or whomever ends up leading the group, will need to ensure you have some governance structure in place to set the group up for success over the long term.

We provide more information about this in the [WorkforClimate organising playbook](#).

Step 3: Activate people

Once you've created a movement and you've raised the profile of climate action within your organisation with the creation of an employee-led climate action group, it is time to activate people and start providing pathways for them to incorporate climate action in their role.

Below are some of the ways each job function can add a climate lens to their roles. This isn't a comprehensive list – use these as a starting point for a bigger discussion and see how these can be adapted to your context. Some companies have created their own fact sheets on how each function within the company can contribute to the wider sustainability goals.

HUMAN RESOURCES

- Review the default superannuation fund and its exposure to fossil fuels. Switch to a fossil-free option.
- Review the company mission, vision, and values. Do they reflect the reality of climate change and the role of the company in it?
- Add climate-related employee benefits, such as:
 - enabling novated car leases for electric vehicles
 - offering charging stations for employees' electric vehicles
- Design incentives and pay bonuses to integrate climate goals
- Introduce a sustainable travel policy
- Encourage employees to commute to and from work together

FINANCE

- Implement sustainability reporting (GRI, SASB, TCFD)
- Implement an internal carbon price to reflect the economic cost of emissions
- Measure financed emissions - the emissions associated with company's cash and investments
- Review banking relationships and moving money to more sustainable banks wherever possible
- Implement a climate and supply chain risk assessment
- Consider resources use and costs in CapEx and OpEx calculations

PROCUREMENT

- Purchase renewable energy, both on-site (installing solar panels for example) and off-site (GreenPower or other procurement methods)
- Implement energy efficiency measures
- Require suppliers to disclose their climate impact and favouring climate-friendly suppliers
- Aim for a higher percentage of purchased materials that are reused and/or recycled
- Organise forums for industry partners to connect on sustainability topics

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

- Review how climate change and environmental action is reflected and represented in marketing and branding activities
- Assess media and advertising relationships and stop working with agencies that support fossil fuel clients
- Measure the environmental impact of marketing activities
- Find creative ways to nudge customers into taking climate action
- Work with local communities on sustainability initiatives

SALES

- Upskill sales team to integrate climate action in product unique selling propositions and in all sales conversations
- Educate the sales team on the climate footprint of products and services sold
- Incentivise sales teams based on sustainability targets
- Invest in an electric vehicle fleet for outside sales teams

THE DOS AND DON'TS OF ENGAGING EMPLOYEES ON CLIMATE ACTION



DO



DO NOT

MAKE IT RELEVANT

To get someone on-board with climate action, they need to understand “what’s in it for them”, and how this relates to their day-to-day role and responsibilities. If climate initiatives feel like a separate strategy, distant from the rest of the organisation, people will be less likely to engage.

FOCUS ON HEADLINES

News headlines can often feel pretty doomy and uninspiring – and they often have little to do with people’s day-to-day lives. It’s much more effective to find what motivates someone towards action than it is to keep hitting them over the head with the same headlines, slogans or science.

MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE

A key aspect of your role as a sustainability advocate inside your company is to play the role of a translator.

USE TECHNICAL JARGON

Solitaire Townsend, founder of sustainability agency Futerra, used to ask sustainability experts to “leave the room” for sustainability workshops with business leaders.

This is because sustainability jargon tends to put people off.

MAKE IT INCLUSIVE

Seek to actively involve employees in the sustainability and climate plan and engage all employees.

More specifically, think about representation in the voices that carry the sustainability agenda. Many sustainability working groups are underrepresented by minority groups such as people of colour and Indigenous people. And yet the climate crisis tends to disproportionately impact exactly these communities. Those most impacted by the problem must have a seat at the table.

CUT OUT THE BIG WIGS

While they may be the roadblocks in the way of effective climate action at work, it’s also true that those in senior/exec positions are the ones who can make or break your plan – so you need to bring them on this journey too.

That means using language that will be acceptable within the corporate context, and ensuring you avoid an ‘us versus them’ dynamic at all costs. It’s everyone versus climate action, and everyone within your company is a potential agent of change in this scenario.

MAKE IT AUTHENTIC

Share your progress and celebrate wins but also acknowledge where you’re falling short.

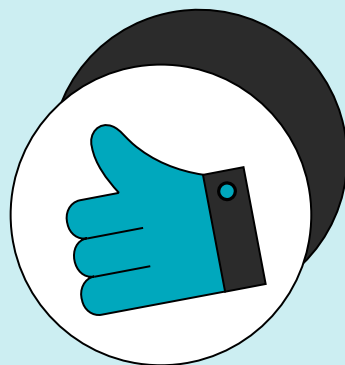
Employees, as well as customers and other stakeholders, will think more highly and reward a company for being authentic about where it is on the sustainability journey.

SEND MIXED SIGNALS

Employees will stop engaging in the company’s environmental efforts if they feel like those efforts are being undermined by contradictory KPIs.

For example, if your sales team is given a quota to grow revenue 20% year on year, it’s likely that achieving sustainability goals at the same time will prove challenging, or even impossible. This will lead to frustration and disengagement.

Conclusion



Of course, the reality will not be as simple as these 3 steps. It will be an on-going, long-term journey. And there will be peaks and troughs along the way. But as people's concern about the climate crisis grows, so will the pool of people willing to take action. Sustainability managers who have been doing amazing work to push the climate agenda forward will get more people in their "extended team" to support them.

Thanks for reading, and good luck in getting your teams - every team - on-board with climate action!

For any questions or if you need coaching, reach out to WorkforClimate by emailing info@workforclimate.org

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