

Coaching:

a critical component in driving sustainable innovation and transforming business

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Leading organisations from the private, public and third sector are increasingly focusing their sustainability initiatives on transformational and systemic change, rather than incremental improvements. It is the link between the transformation in values and real-world outcomes – in terms of innovation and performance – that highlights the critical role of coaching.

First, we want to emphasise that our experience, and increasingly the experience within leading organisations, is that the psychological and cultural dimensions of sustainability are at least as significant as the behavioural, technical, economic and ecological implications. It is our values, perceptions, emotions and interactions that either support or inhibit the creation and successful implementation of sustainable strategies and technologies.

In our research, we applied a broad definition of coaching and identified many distinct ways in which a coach can enable others to develop new skills, gain knowledge and live in greater alignment with their values. The variety of coaching approaches – from one-on-one coaching for executives to peer-to-peer coaching in 'carbon clubs' – all offer a highly flexible, dialogue-based, developmental approach to improving individual and organisational performance. Our research showed that coaching was already being used to support sustainability initiatives in a variety of ways (for example, within leadership development programmes and within peer groups of sustainability 'champions') to increase understanding of issues such as ethics, diversity and carbon management. Coaching joins the two distinct dimensions of sustainability – values and culture on the one hand, and

behaviour and systems on the other – for both individuals and organisations.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES, SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

We found evidence for the benefits of engaging with the 'soft' dimensions of sustainability at an organisational and team level. At the organisational level, we noted that coaching can support the emergence of a new sense of 'who' organisations are and not just what they do (ie: services instead of products), and was one important aspect of creating a culture supportive of the integration and implementation of sustainability initiatives. Coaching also enhances the ability of teams to maximise the contribution of people of diverse expertise and culture, and helps individuals develop collaborative leadership styles appropriate to the increasingly complex challenges and the new opportunities.

The contribution that coaching can make is valuable for developing new skills and knowledge. But, perhaps most importantly, it has the power to transform leaders and generate innovation. The capability, culture and development of key individuals and teams can make a profound difference to an organisation's ability to integrate sustainability, develop new services and products, and create more effective relationships with customers and stakeholders. Coaching is the most widely used (90 per cent of line managers employ coaching) and highly rated (74 per cent expect to increase their coaching activities) method for developing and evolving individuals and teams.

Organisations who see sustainability as an opportunity also know that realising the benefits means making a move to the next level of thinking and acting – innovating, creating new markets, and

playing an active role in transforming society.

SUSTAINABILITY INSIDE-OUT

Private-sector organisations can no longer look for competitive advantage simply in increased efficiency or more effective use of internal resources. Instead, they must seek opportunities for innovation in a changing external context – a world of emerging markets and increasing commodity prices. It is the capability of individuals and teams to understand this external context, question assumptions, take new perspectives and think long-term that will prove to be the source of advantage.

These capabilities can be facilitated through coaching – as some of the quotes from our interviewees illustrate.

"We intentionally generate coaching conversations around self, relationships, and complex systems (all of which are central for addressing the deeply personal and inherently systemic nature of sustainability) – so the benefits include an expanded 'systemic consciousness' and an 'increased capacity to innovate together' where there was once divides."

"Sustainability portfolio is really a key enabler to getting individuals to think long-term. And behave with long-term in mind. In terms of good coaching being able to draw these things out of you and enabling you to pull back or pull up from what you are doing... [coaching and sustainability] are very strongly linked."

"...I think the piece we are bringing in now, which we are calling sustainable economic growth, means that our product can help other individuals have better lives... Now we ask 'How can our products and solutions make everyone else's lives better?' That's good business anyway, and actually that will turn on anyone in the company: 'Hey you can make more money out of this'. Now for us... this is a serious business opportunity."

These benefits can be realised through a range of coaching methodologies. Our recent research characterises over a dozen distinct approaches to coaching and relates them to an organisation's stage of engagement with the sustainability agenda. We hope that our work will lay the foundations for more organisations and individuals to use coaching, consciously and effectively, to evolve values, grow sustainable cultures, support collective learning and generate sustainable innovation ◻

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