

### Four ways coaching can support a sustainable culture

Leading organisations are increasingly aware that internal, invisible barriers to sustainability and innovation, such as the cultural values and habits within organisations, are more significant than the visible, technical barriers. Coaching is one of the most effective means to shift the culture of an organisation, and to overcome the barriers to a positive, innovative, high-performance culture. Here, we explore four areas where a coaching and cultural focus can generate positive change.

To be clear, when we refer to cultural change, we mean lasting structural and social changes in an organisation, plus lasting changes to the shared ways of thinking, beliefs, values, procedures and relationships of the stakeholders. From this definition, it is clear we are not talking just about structures and systems, rather we are focusing on people, and their capabilities and priorities.

Firstly, we consider coaching to be a more appropriate than straight training as a means of introducing new practices and initiatives. For example, we found there are topics and issues that are best addressed using coaching rather than training. These might include integrity, independence, diversity, and ethics which can not be 'taught' rather require individuals to explore their own response to these topics within some structured programme. And, this is exactly the approach taken by an auditing firm we spoke to, for whom these issues are critical for effective delivery of their services.

Secondly, coaching is a practice that can improve relationships across the organisation, demonstrating a commitment to both the means and the end of sustainability. For example, in a large telecommunications company, groups of volunteers from the same department or floor on a building work as a team on reducing carbon emissions. They support each other, are coached by a senior person, and have access to a director-level mentor. This approach was attributed to overcoming potential cultural and practical barriers to reducing waste to landfill. The result: a 12% decrease in waste rather than the 4% target.

Thirdly, recent research into organisations leading the way in integrating sustainability suggested culture was the top contributor to their success. Coaching can play an important role in the engagement process, and in building a new culture around new strategic direction. Three of our interviewees described the role of coaching in engaging the whole organisation in sustainability:

- 1) Is about involving individuals and encouraging them to embrace it than saying "do as you're told" *It's a far more effective and practical way of building commitment than saying 'Here is the new policy, and here is the new culture of the company.... Understand it or you are not going to prosper'*
- 2) Is appropriate given the fact that *"Sustainable development has never been done before, so we have to make it up as we go along. That means that we have to be alert, nimble, reflective, and brave. Coaching is a really good method of helping us to be like this."*

Finally, developing a sustainable culture may also be about changing and innovating the relationship you have with your customer. Coaching staff through new ways to empathise and engage customers in a new type of relationship, is an effective and appropriate way to develop new norms and habits that are more aligned with the needs of key stakeholders. One of our interviewees, from a power company, described how shifting culture was much more difficult than engineering problems because *"it is not directly controlled. It is a cultural thing, which is going to take quite a long time to achieve."* And, another, described how coaching can facilitate greater innovation through allowing people to be *"less defensive about making mistakes. That is one of the keys to innovation is not being afraid to make mistakes. People can be allowed to experiment..."*

What we have shown through this research is that coaching is one of the most effective means to shift the culture of an organisation, and integrate sustainability. This is critical because often internal, invisible barriers to sustainability and innovation, such as the cultural values and habits within organisations, are more significant than the visible, technical barriers. Here, we looked briefly at four specific ways in which coaching and cultural focus can generate positive change.