

Coaching to support 'skilling up' for sustainability challenges

Sustainability initiatives in leading organisations are increasingly focusing on transformational and systemic change. Change of this magnitude is necessarily preceded by the first steps of education, process improvement, eco-efficiency etc. – all areas where individuals and organisations will need to develop new knowledge and skills. In addition to reflecting on their values and connection to the issues in a way that supports transformation, individuals also need new knowledge to build cross-sectoral partnerships with civil society organisations, and new skills in areas such as carbon management.

Here we wanted to briefly explore the role of coaching for the latter purpose. This firstly means coaching to both develop the knowledge, and skills for 'doing' sustainability, and secondly coaching to develop the breadth of experience and perspectives to be able to engage with others such as civil society organisations or individuals with different skills or values.

Leadership within organisations and for sustainability requires the ability of leaders to work across issues, business units, areas of expertise and cultures. The shift from an expert or specialist to someone who has broader interests, skills, and intelligences can be facilitated through coaching. The coaching helps individuals to explore interests beyond their roles, and outside their comfort zone, it helps them set priorities, goals and support them on the learning journey.

Our interviewees cited several cases where developing this breadth of interest in skills was relevant to both developing leaders generally, but also specifically relevant to sustainability. For example, *"...the individuals who are going to succeed are going to be the ones who are clued up on this [sustainability]. Not the ones who are clued up on spreadsheets and finance. It will be the ones who have gone out there proactively and educated themselves and taken a wider interest in these worldwide sustainability issues."*

Whether it be through trying new things (e.g. using expertise in voluntary work with a charity), engaging with new teams and disciplines (e.g. in a cross-departmental or international team), or mastering new skills (e.g. facilitation, carbon footprint calculations) these activities all increase the range of experiences leaders can draw on when seeking to 'translate' and relate sustainability issues to others who may have different roles, priorities or mindsets. Coaching can help develop the necessary level of self-awareness to understand that others may be operating from a different set of values and assumptions as others.

The ability to speak to and engage with others in a language that resonates with them is a critical skill for leaders, whether it is for building support for internal sustainability initiatives, or selling 'green' services to clients. Our research emphasised the importance of both these skills. Firstly, to empathise with the perspectives of specialist engineer, marketing manager and shop-floor worker who have different reasons to engage with sustainability (e.g. driver and opportunity for innovation; a chance to anticipate market trends and develop products; or a reason to reduce toxins in manufactured products). Secondly, to sell: *"Some of the individuals who are selling them [environmental services] probably come from a very green thinking point of view, and others are probably less naturally from that point of view. But because it is a service that we sell and there's an opportunity to generate income, you can kind of naturally have to see the opportunities around environmental management and being able to provide those services."*

In all the ways described above, coaching can help develop the new knowledge and skills to integrate sustainability within organisations, and develop leader's breadth of experience and perspectives so they can engage with individuals and organisations with different skills or values. These are necessary and complementary steps for individuals and organisations wanting to lead transformation and systemic change, and gain competitive advantage. More details of these different modes and benefits of coaching can be found in the full report.