

# Why culture is key for sustainability excellence

**The sustainability manager is dead! Long live the sustainability manager! Why is culture so often overlooked as critical to sustainability leadership?**



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**M**y job as a sustainability manager is to put myself out of a job!" It's one of those classic phrases that I've been hearing for over 10 years now. It's not quite up there with the "sustainability is in our DNA" cliché, but it's certainly stood the test of time.

The idea behind the phrase is that a successful sustainability manager will be so good at embedding sustainability into the wider organisation that existing departments will "own" the sustainability strategy collectively and, all the way up to the C-suite, each person will contribute to the overall effort to the point that a central sustainability role is no longer necessary. Surely that is a naïve approach.

While there are many successful examples of embedding sustainability into the business, I haven't seen a mass extinction of sustainability managers. On the contrary, the importance of the role is rising, with many organisations appointing

a chief sustainability officer (CSO) and ensuring board-level responsibility for the topic. A central challenge for anyone working in a corporate sustainability role is to ensure the sustainability of the role itself, precisely because sustainability is a mission that evolves and needs to be renewed over time.

Rather than think about one's extinction, one needs to focus on one's legacy in this role because sustainability isn't just a technical task – running a process to ensure improvement over time, monitor and report – but also vision that needs to be championed, internally and externally.



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## **The culture underpinning leadership**

This is a perspective that is borne out in the GlobeScan/SustainAbility sustainability leadership survey that gets input each year from hundreds of experts. When asked what constitutes leadership in sustainability, respondents cite “sustainability values/purpose”, “communication/advocacy” and “leadership/setting standards” among the most important attributes. Leadership therefore is not just a question of delivering an integrated strategy, implementing an ambitious set of targets and driving organisational transformation (not a small task to be sure). It’s also about ensuring an internal culture that can sustain and engage with that agenda, today and into the future.

Changing a business, after all, is a question of changing behaviours. And behaviours are grounded in culture.

In Italy, the CSR Manager Network last year rebranded as Sustainability Makers, a welcome shift that signals a growing awareness of the leadership challenge. It’s especially positive at a time when membership of the association is growing rapidly. Not only is the outdated acronym of CSR dropped in favour of the globally recognised term of sustainability but above all the focus has been put on the role of sustainability professionals as “makers” or enablers.

The association’s chair, Marisa Parmigiani from insurance group Unipol, recently talked to Vanity Fair about the change of name and change of spirit. When asked if companies are really intent on becoming more sustainable or just talking more about their efforts, she answered: “I think change is under way. Still, it’s no doubt true that companies are communicating more than before about what they’re doing in sustainability because there’s a sense that it’s more interesting.

Let me give you a practical example: in the past, the press office would tell their sustainability manager that no one was interested in their activities; now they are banging at the door and asking us what we have to talk about because our topics are so cool.”

## Calling all ambassadors

It's perhaps indicative of this shift in attitudes that a glossy magazine like *Vanity Fair* chose to spotlight someone like Parmigiani, and this also connects to the rising role that women play in leadership roles in business generally.

The Sustainability Makers chair clearly has a sense that there is a certain culture uniting all of us who work on sustainability issues, 62% of whom are women according to a recent study.

“I'm a big supporter of the idea that sustainability is above all feminine from a professional point of view. It has two traits in particular that are considered as approaches of feminine behaviour: the ability to listen and mediate.

Sustainability, moreover, means above all taking care, an inclination not to erode but to conserve resources.”

But what's the risk here? I wonder if sustainability professionals – despite the female majority - have the necessary aptitude for communications and engagement to make them true ambassadors for sustainability within their organisations. It's a problem that starts early in the career path. I've been involved in a number of courses preparing students or young professionals for a career in sustainability but very often I'm the only person in the entire course to talk about communications. And corporate culture appears even less

often in these programmes, which tend to reinforce the traditional silo of the sustainability function focused only on performance metrics and reporting.

## Building bridges internally

Very often, there is a breakdown because communications people don't understand sustainability and sustainability people who don't get communications.

This lack of trust in each other is common and can lead to veiled hostility: the sustainability function is terrified of slipping into the greenwashing trap and bristles at what it sees as superficial or misleading claims to being sustainable or green; the communications function despairs at colleagues in sustainability who appear only once a year, with a hefty tome of a sustainability report “that needs to be communicated” (as if the communications effort starts only once the report has been finalized).

There is an evident need for responsible communications, and that needs to be embedded into both sustainability and communications practices.

Very often purpose is the glue that connects sustainability to culture and behaviours and communications.

Not purpose in the sense of an emotionally loaded mission statement, a kind of corporate slogan, but a sense of purpose that guides the whole business and all employees towards common aspirations beyond the bottom line.

In the words of Jeroen van der Veer, former CEO of Royal Dutch Shell and ex-chairman of Philips: “the successful companies of the future will be those that integrate business and employees' personal values.

## Five ways to embed a culture of sustainability

1. Lead by example and make sure management behaviours are coherent with a culture of sustainability.
2. Make employees feel engaged in the sustainability journey by actively involving them in surveys, workshops, ambassador programmes, storytelling, etc.
3. Don't make sustainability only about a "better future": show the connections between the past (heritage) and what lies ahead.
4. Make sure you are digitally fluent so you can leverage your engagement skills and advocacy even in a hybrid, hyper-connected work environment.
5. Make HR your allies to build sustainable values into internal comms and talent attraction.

The best people want to do work that contributes to society with a company whose values they share, where their actions count and their views matter."

Art and culture certainly have a role to play here, due to their strong emotional connections. Art in particular has a vast potential to transform society thanks to its ability to provide new perspectives and challenge entrenched ways of seeing the world. And Europe is full of companies boasting long histories going back 100 years or more and that can draw on their heritage to support these connections.

The challenge is to make sure that the cultural initiatives help to reinforce the sense of purpose, connect directly to a narrative of transformation and innovation in an era of rapid change and global challenges (see our article on page 6). To repeat, culture is a question

of behaviours, which means that the company and its management need to lead by example, so that employees and other stakeholders can see a culture of sustainability in practice.

It may mean long-term leadership in its sector for health and safety practices and performance; a recognised track record in emissions reduction; a culture of inclusion that embraces not only employees but also the products and services or the supply chain.

From this perspective, there is more need than ever to lead this culture of sustainability, champion sustainable practices and keep ambitions high. Yes, it has to be embedded into the organisation but corporate sustainability itself needs to be sustainable and sustained.