



# Program development

Developing your company's sustainability journey

By Peter Love and Yasmin Glanville

This is the first of a series of articles to assist you design, implement, verify and market your company's sustainability journey. These articles are prepared by the founding directors of a new volunteer organization called Rethink Sustainability Initiatives (RSI). The directors are all senior executives involved in sustainability programs from the academic, banking, engineering, manufacturing, mining, retail and strategic consulting sectors.

In order to be comprehensive, we are starting at the beginning to help those who are just starting out on their journey

as well as letting others have a better understanding of where they are and what they need to consider doing next.

## Program design

There are nine basic steps to design a successful sustainability program:

- **Prepare an initial plan** – Before you can begin the next eight steps, you will need an initial summary of the vision and goals of the proposed sustainability development program. We suggest you start with defining what you mean and what you are actually trying to achieve by adopting a sustainability

mindset. It will be important to ensure that it supports your company's key strategic business priorities.

- **Build your team** – Regardless of the size of your organization, you will need help. The more employees that you can involve in the sustainability team, the better. Try to ensure that you have at least one person from each department – ask others on the team to identify potential members too. Internal company newsletters, staff meetings, intranet postings, blogs can all be a great way to let others know that you are looking to build a new team.
- **Select a leader** – Experience has clearly proven that most teams work better when there is a leader. The leader does not have to be the most senior ranking person or the one with the most leadership experience. An ideal term is typically two years – one year is too short to make real progress and three can frustrate other would-be leaders.
- **Secure senior executive support** – Next ensure your initiative has senior executive support. This will be an iterative process and should start as soon as possible. Ideally, one of the senior executives will become a champion, if not a member of the team. Full support should not be expected until a complete plan has been developed. Useful tools to help build your case include practical books and academic publications about sustainability development in the context of business – such as:
  - Bob Willard's books on the Sustainability Advantage
  - A recent study by Robert Eccles published in the Harvard Business School which found that "high sustainability" companies significantly outperform their counterparts over the

long term, both in terms of stock price and performance

- The World Business Council on Sustainable Development.

(A link to these documents can be found on the Rethink Sustainability Initiatives web site ([www.rethinksustainabilityinitiatives.ca](http://www.rethinksustainabilityinitiatives.ca)))

- **Identify and research "Best practices" in your industry** – Start by identifying companies in your industry known as "sustainability leaders" in Canada and abroad. Refine and validate a short list of top players through internet searches, reviewing industry and sustainability trade magazines and academic papers, speakers at conferences and other means. The next step is to compile publicly available information on what they have done to become best practice leaders, and how this created sustainable value for their organizations and the communities in which they operate. Follow this up with direct communication with a select few. They may be more than willing to share further insights with you on their journey and the lessons they have learned.
- **Benchmark current sustainability performance** – The first quantitative activity is to identify the major environmental, economic and social metrics appropriate for your particular company. Look at the metrics being used by similar companies in your sector that are "sustainability leaders" and international organizations like the Global Reporting Initiative ([www.globalreporting.org](http://www.globalreporting.org)). Once established, your team will then need to compile baseline information on each of these metrics for whatever base year you pick.

- **Set targets** – Once you have established your metrics, then set short term (1 year), medium term (2-5 years) and longer term targets. Make sure they are aggressive and attainable.

- **Define activities/milestones** – Next, you need to develop a clear work plan that includes specific activities and measureable milestones that will help you achieve your targets. To encourage participation and build confidence, include a few quick and easy wins, with more challenging activities. To get the word out, use fun events, building on existing company initiatives where possible. Lunch-and-Learn events featuring outside speakers are often very successful.

- **Include other stakeholders** – Don't forget to let your company's other stakeholders know about what you are doing. These include company shareholders as well as customers, suppliers and the broader communities in which your company operates. They will all be interested in what you are doing and there may be opportunities to work on joint initiatives with them.

We wish you well on your sustainability journey. Please let us know how you are doing so we can report on it in subsequent articles. And let us know if you are finding these tips useful, what else you need and how we might assist you. **BS&S**

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