Embedding Sustainability in Municipal Culture

Best Practices for Municipalities

Christina Treleaven, UBC Sustainability Scholar, 2017

ABSTRACT

Embedding sustainability into organizational culture requires a variety of key considerations, including change management, structural change, and employee engagement.

Prepared for: Krista Daniszewski, Sustainability Programs Specialist
Township of Langley
August 2017

Executive Summary

Embedding sustainability into an organizational culture requires ongoing commitment and effort. An embedded approach requires that sustainability not function simply as an addition to culture, a stand-alone component tacked on as an afterthought, but rather that it forms an essential part of the fabric of the culture itself.

Key Themes and Considerations

In additional to approaching culture change from a change management perspective, organizations must consider two fundamental functional areas: organizational structure and employee engagement. This report outlines best practices for addressing these key considerations when working to embed sustainability into an organizational culture.
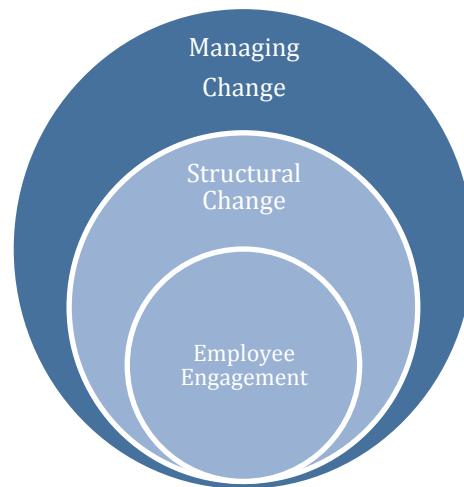
Managing Change

Structural Change

Employee Engagement

Key Role of Leadership

As with any change, support from senior leaders is essential to successfully embedding sustainability into organizational culture. Interview participants consistently reinforced the important role that leaders play in driving organizational change, as well as in demonstrating commitment to sustainability as an organizational value. Organizational change cannot happen without leadership support, so making a strong case and getting buy-in from influential individuals will be necessary.

Conclusion

Organizations looking to embed sustainability into their corporate culture must contend with both structural change and work to engage employees throughout the process. A clear vision and strong leader support, combined with specific and measureable goals and targets that are monitored and evaluated regularly, will help to ensure that organizations' succeed in achieving sustainability initiatives.

Structural Change

▲ POLICIES AND DOCUMENTS
Review and revise strategic policy documents to outline sustainability goals and targets

▲ SUSTAINABILITY DEPARTMENT
Legitimize organizational sustainability by creating formal departments and roles

▲ GOALS AND TARGETS
Establish a clear and overarching vision that the organization can strive towards. Focus on continuous monitoring and involve a variety of stakeholders into planning and development.

Employee Engagement

▲ DEFINE SUSTAINABILITY
Identify and communicate your organization's definition of and approach to sustainability

▲ CREATE AND MAINTAIN ENGAGEMENT
Host fun activities, challenges, and initiatives. Incorporate Human Resources for recruitment and orientation opportunities.

▲ INTER-DEPARTMENTAL INVOLVEMENT
Create and support inter-departmental projects, committees, and green teams

Introduction

Sustainability, in its various forms, is a key consideration for organizations and society as a whole. With issues of climate change and economic stability at the forefront of individual and organizational concerns, developing sustainable solutions is of the utmost importance. As we recognize that sustainability cannot be simply treated as an addition to our current approaches, but rather should form the basis of how we develop solutions, we must ask ourselves: how can an organization ensure that sustainability is incorporated into their regular, everyday decision-making and organizational culture? This paper explores how organizations can work to embed sustainability into their corporate culture by learning from the experiences of municipalities and businesses across Canada

Data collected for this study includes recent academic research as well as 12 interviews with municipalities and businesses from across Canada. The report outlines the best practices for how a municipality can embed sustainability into their corporate culture as well as highlights case studies that showcase local businesses' sustainability practices and initiatives.

Embedding Sustainability is a Change Management Process

Moving towards a culture of sustainability is, ultimately, a process of organizational change. Pursuing structural, behavioural, and cultural change using change management techniques and skills will ease the process for employees and help to ensure that they are positive, engaged, and supportive of the initiative, both in the short term as well as in the longer term. Community-based social marketing techniques may also be beneficial in engaging employees in behaviour change. Although this report is not focused on change management specifically, readers who are interested in embedding sustainability into organizational culture would do well to ensure that their efforts to do so align with generally accepted change management processes and approaches.

Key Considerations for Embedding Sustainability into Organizational Culture

Embedding sustainability into an organizational culture requires ongoing commitment and effort. The concept of "embedding" highlights that sustainability is not simply an addition to culture, a stand-alone component tacked on as an afterthought, but rather it forms an essential part of the fabric of the culture itself. Integrating sustainability into daily activities, decisions, attitudes and behaviours is no small feat (Harris & Crane, 2002), but several municipalities and organizations have made great strides in achieving these goals.

In additional to approaching culture change from a change management perspective, organizations must consider two fundamental functional areas: organizational structure

and employee engagement. The following sections outline these key considerations for organizations working to embed sustainability into their workplace culture.

Structural Considerations

Policy audit and generation of new policy and decision-making documents

An important first step in embedding sustainability into organizational culture is incorporating sustainability into decision-making documents and policies, including departmental budgets and operations planning, as well as developing a strategic sustainability plan. This approach ensures that employees at all levels of the organization acknowledge sustainability as a key component of project development and decision making, as well as holding employees and senior leaders accountable for ensuring that their initiatives and activities align with the goals and vision for the municipality.

Sustainability Department or official sustainability roles

A recent report published by The Natural Step (2011) highlights the importance of organizational structure and placement in creating legitimacy for sustainability initiatives, arguing that dedicated sustainability departments and roles are key to demonstrating that senior leadership supports and believes in corporate sustainability. As one interview participant indicated, the budget is where the values of the organization are on display. Allocating a department and associated staff and budget to sustainability showcases true and lasting commitment.

Sustainability specialists suggest that because sustainability initiatives are cross-functional, they are most effective when treated in the same manner as a Finance, Human Resources, or Communications department. They can provide key expertise to other departments and play a supporting role, but they function individually to ensure that overarching policies and procedures are followed, and that corporate goals are monitored and achieved.

Sustainability Planning – Goals and Targets

Establishing a clear and overarching vision for organizational sustainability, alongside concrete targets and goals, is fundamentally important to embedding sustainability into corporate culture. Several interviewees recited the adage that "what gets measured gets done," arguing that without specific targets to pursue and work towards, municipalities – and their employees – are less likely to prioritize sustainability initiatives.

Employee Engagement and Roll-Out Considerations

Employee engagement is a fundamental component of any change, but embedding sustainability requires that employees not only perform their work differently but also think about their work differently. They must consider sustainability in every aspect of their role and in every project or initiative that they pursue – at the outset and in the

development of their project, not as an addition after the fact. In other words, sustainability must be understood as an organizational value, one that permeates decision making and employee thought processes. Research and participant interviews provide insight into key considerations to ease the transition for employees and to ensure that they are engaged with – and in – embedding sustainability into the organizational culture.

Defining Sustainability

Sustainability can seem vague or a bit unclear, and while it typically connotes images of environmental or "green" initiatives, for municipalities it can span a variety of areas, including economic, cultural, and social as well as environmental sustainability. Harris and Crane (2002) highlight the importance of common language and clarity around what "culture of sustainability" really means – employees may find it difficult to rally around and buy into sustainability if they do not understand what, exactly, that means for the organization itself.

Creating and Maintaining Engagement

Employee engagement is central to culture change, because employees themselves reinforce and recreate organizational culture through their behaviour and actions. Ensuring that sustainability forms a central part of the day-to-day activities within the organization requires employee participation. This is also an ongoing process – employees must regularly and consistently engage in sustainable behaviours in order to ensure culture change.   Many municipalities have seen success in generating employee participation and engagement by initiating fun and creative activities, and some municipalities have worked to Incorporate sustainability into job descriptions and/or performance evaluations as a means to help ensure that employees recognize their contribution to the organization's sustainability goals.

Inter-Departmental Involvement

Interview participants consistently identified the importance of inter-departmental involvement in both the development and implementation of sustainability goals, targets and programs. Because municipalities are large and multi-functional, there cannot be a "one size fits all" approach to sustainability. Instead, employers must consider each department's unique roles and needs, and pursue a diverse approach to goal achievement. Furthermore, a central component of effective change management is employee involvement. In order to accept change, employees must feel as though they are a *part* of the process and that decisions are not made and imposed unilaterally by senior leadership (Harris & Crane, 2002).

Key Role of Leadership

As with any change, support from senior leaders is essential to successfully embedding sustainability into organizational culture. Interview participants consistently reinforced the important role that leaders play in driving organizational change, as well as in demonstrating commitment to sustainability as an organizational value. Fernandez and

5

Rainey (2006) highlight that in the public sector it is important to have commitment and support from both senior level staff as well as elected officials, and the representation of both will help to ensure that the change can be maintained despite short term political changes. In other words, both Council and Senior Leadership must be on side to effect change.

While the vast majority of municipalities interviewed indicated that the initial decision to embed sustainability into the organization's culture and strategic planning was driven by either Council or the City Manager, and that such an approach allowed for the implementation of systemic change, in some cases the desire for incorporating sustainability as an organizational value may stem from middle management or from employees themselves. Where this is the case, employees must bring leaders onside at the outset and showcase the value to the organization such that the senior leadership team chooses the support the initiative. Organizational change cannot happen without leadership support, so making a strong case and getting buy-in from influential individuals will be necessary.

Conclusion

Embedding sustainability into organizational culture is a change process, and it requires both top-down and bottom-up support from within the organization. Organizations looking to embed sustainability into their corporate culture must contend with both structural change and work to engage employees throughout the process. A clear vision, combined with specific and measureable goals and targets that are monitored and evaluated regularly will help to ensure that organizations' succeed in achieving sustainability initiatives. Leader involvement in highlighting sustainability as an organizational value, and the incorporation of sustainability into strategic documents and HR processes will help employees to think about sustainability not as an important addition to their work but rather as a fundamental part of their job.

References

Fernandez, S., & Rainey, H. G. (2006). Managing Successful Organizational Change in the Public Sector. *Public Administration Review*, *66*(2), 168–176.

Harris, L. C., & Crane, A. (2002). The greening of organizational culture: Management views on the depth, degree, and diffusion of change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *15*(3), 214–234. http://doi.org/10.1108/09534810210429273

Network for Business Sustainability, The Natural Step, & Bertels, S. (2011). *Embedding Sustainability into the Culture of Municipal Government*.