earthwatch learning

ROOTED IN NATURE

6 secrets to embedding sustainability into your business

Whether you're just embarking on the journey to developing an environmental sustainability strategy, or you've done the legwork and now want to embed it in your business, here are the secrets to success from our experts at Earthwatch Europe.

1 KEEP IT REAL

Let's just name the elephant in the room and get it over with: if environmental sustainability is primarily a marketing exercise to you, then you're going to open your company up to allegations of greenwashing. The public are increasingly learning how to spot greenwashing (aided by guides including this one from the BBC) and call it out, and the ramifications of that on your reputation could be huge: as South Korean beauty label Innesfree found last year. Sometimes it just happens by accident, as an oversight – but if you are genuine about making change happen, you're much less likely to fall into that trap.

The development of a true environmental sustainability strategy is an opportunity to review your business holistically, strengthen your operations and build an inspiring and lasting legacy. It should never be seen as an add-on or a top-dressing.

Remember how much public demand there is for action, and how high your customers' expectations are becoming – this is an opportunity to position your company ahead of the competition and create a really robust business plan that adds value to the world and prepares you for an ever-changing future.

2 REMEMBER THAT ONE SIZE NEVER FITS ALL

It's always important to learn from others... but don't just copy what they've done. Strategies that seem to be working for your competitors could be disastrous for your company. Every organisation has its own culture, values, brand, territories, employees, processes, customer base. The imitation game has never been all it's cracked up to be, and environmental sustainability strategies are no exception to that rule.

In creating an environmental sustainability strategy, it's an opportunity to reflect on your business's brand, values and ambitions. In doing so you might see strategic growth areas that you hadn't previously considered, or find new solutions to product development challenges you've been grappling with for a while.

The headline: make this about your business, not someone else's.

This is where there's real value to be had from inviting in third party expertise, and work with providers who can ask questions, analyse business need and business risk objectively, and make recommendations for next steps. Look for providers who are going to work with you to tailor any development experiences to your business, rather than provide an off-the-shelf product. This isn't a box-ticking exercise.

3

ADOPT A LEARNING MINDSET

The tools that you need to make sustainability happen in your business might already be out there: the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example, can be used to provide an internationally-ratified framework for sustainability in any context. But sometimes it can be hard to understand how those tools can be implemented, and you might just need someone to show you where to look.

The other thing that can bamboozle even the sharpest of executive minds is the constant change in environmental policy and regulation. The introduction in 2015 of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), for example, was a welcome addition to international efforts to address climate-change, but placed radical new requirements on the financial services industry. For many organisations it shone a light on gaps in their knowledge that needed to be plugged.

This is where a learning mindset becomes so important. Because these new challenges are really opportunities to strengthen supply chains and get ahead of the game.

4

THINK BIGGER

At Earthwatch we are huge fans of a BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal). First introduced back in 1994, a BHAG is a powerful tool to galvanise teams and motivate them to think big.

In the context of a sustainability strategy, it helps to both define its potential and look long term.

This goal doesn't have to be static. It's is completely possible to revisit and revise it to ensure it remains relevant and attainable (and truly ambitious – we ended up achieving our BHAG in one of our programmes in under three years! But such can be the power of the BHAG…).

Your approach to sustainability doesn't have to start big – regardless of whether that's in terms of financial commitment, time or other resources – but it's important to start out with the intention that activity can be scalable and that the BHAG will allow space to expand and adapt as your project unfolds. By setting out with this in mind, you can also assess potential partners to help you get there.

5

INCLUDE STAFF AT ALL LEVELS, FROM INTERNS TO THE CEO

We can't stress this point enough: strong sustainability strategies need advocates at all levels of a business and from both partners. It takes a village to raise a child. It takes a whole organisation to ensure buy-in and create and implement an approach that is really robust.

It doesn't matter how great a project is, it will not succeed if people at all levels and functions are not bought into it. Employee engagement activities can increase productivity and talent retention, and can create real advocates for positive change.

There are lots of ways to build this advocacy: staff volunteering days; awareness-raising sessions to help people understand the wider environmental context within which their business is operating; building champion networks who can drive activity within their teams and business functions.

The bottom line: make sure you use innovative and engaging ways to bring your whole organisation with you.

6

FIND A PARTNER WHO SHARES YOUR VISION

You don't have to do this on your own: it's invaluable to get an external, objective viewpoint and enter the process with an open mind. By working together with an organisation that has experience of this sort of work, you can start to see where the opportunities for your business might lie.

With over 20 years of business/charity partnerships under our belts, picking up a few awards along the way, at Earthwatch we've learnt that having a shared vision, purpose and mission will make sure that both partners are in it for the right reasons from the outset.

Use the BHAG methodology to build a partnership that has real impact. It's about maximizing and defining the collaborative potential from the outset. The best examples of successful partnerships are long-term and constantly evolving. For example, since 2009 UK pharmaceutical giant Boots has been in partnership with Macmillan cancer care. What started as a fundraising partnership has developed into something that adds real value to Boots' customers, with Macmillan-trained beauty advisors and pharmacists now found in store.

When partners have a shared ambition for positive change, it moves from being a one-sided and transactional relationship, to one that has a real sense of joint value, benefitting both parties and helping their organisations to thrive.

Earthwatch works with business partners to design and deliver transformational sustainability approaches, grounded in immersive experiences and dynamic learning techniques that draw on science and are rooted in nature.

Earthwatch Learning actively engages employees at all levels of an organisation in the understanding and action needed to bring about profound change in their business and meet sustainability goals.

See your business in a new light. Speak to us about what Earthwatch Learning can do for you by emailing **development@earthwatch.org.uk**

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