

Seven Ways to Build Green Habits in the Office

Engage Your Employees in the Process

By K.J. McCorry

When implementing green practices in the workplace, it is important to remember that changing workers habits will not happen instantaneously. To support and drive sustainability initiatives, employees must be engaged in the process.

According to a Globe Scan International Survey, 80 percent of employees surveyed said they felt greater motivation and loyalty toward their company due to its sustainability initiatives and their engagement. The following are key elements of behavior modification that an organization should take into consideration when implementing new green practices;

Give Positive Feedback. It is important for workers to hear words of encouragement and praise when a new behavior occurs. If an employee rode their bike instead of driving, compliment them. When employees are recycling in the appropriate containers, provide appreciation. Providing instant positive feedback will reinforce behaviors to be repeated as well as encourage employees to take ownership of green habits.

Get Commitment. Studies show that a written commitment is good and a verbal one is even better when committing to a new behavior. During a meeting, ask for verbal commitments from each employee on a green action they would like to take to support the organizations sustainability initiatives. Make sure to follow-up at regular intervals to provide accountability for that commitment.

Encourage Practice. Repetition is good. Studies say it takes between 21 to 30 days to form a new habit. It is essential with any green initiative to build-in aspects where employees can make a daily habit or practice. Adults often learn best from hands-on experience versus watching or memorization.

Provide Reminders. Simple and visual reminders, such as emails or signage, can do a lot to help workers remember and build habits. Be sure reminders are constructive and not viewed as nagging or trying to elicit guilt. One option might be to put stickers above light switches reminding people to turn off lights when they leave the room. Another option could be to send an e-mail reminder 15 minutes before the end of the work day reminding people to turn off computers before leaving for the night.

Identify Triggers. Most behaviors have a ‘trigger’ that goes with it. A trigger is a ritual used right before executing a habit. Identify the triggers essential for employees to engage in particular green action. For example, if the goal is to have employees reduce paper consumption, consider installing print management software as the ‘trigger’ before a print job is conducted.

Remove Temptation. Make the new behavior more convenient and accessible and remove the temptation for the old habit. For example, if the goal is encourage employees to use ceramic cups instead of the disposables, move the disposables in a less convenient location and/or off the kitchen counter. Reorganize office areas to remove temptations so that it is easier for new behaviors to emerge.

Connect to Performance: A powerful way to embed sustainability into the company culture is to add it into the performance evaluation system. Performance indicators may currently include non-technical areas such as teamwork, customer service, and communication. Adding sustainability as another indicator is one way to reinforce the organizations commitment to sustainability, and to encourage employees to take it seriously. The sustainability indicator can be weighted the same as other non-technical indicators, especially for the first year. As the sustainability program evolves the metric can be increased or moved to a technical area depending on a person’s job responsibilities.

For sustainability initiatives that require employee engagement it is important to tie in a few behavior modification strategies to support the new practice. These small gestures can make a significant difference to the success of a sustainability program.

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