

COLUMNISTS

Ten steps to developing a sustainable plan

Start small & focus on value

By K.J. McCorry

Many companies have joined the green bandwagon over the past year. However, the majority of Colorado companies still have no sustainability strategy, plan or initiatives.

Achieving sustainability seems overwhelming, especially when it remains a foreign concept for most workers. A sustainability plan doesn't need to be complicated, but it should include the following 10 key elements to be successful.

1. Determine the purpose

Before homing in on green action items and implementation, a company must first reflect on the purpose and goals behind adopting sustainability measures. For most companies the number one goal is to increase the company's reputation and brand image. Other goals might include conserving resources, boosting employee satisfaction, reducing environmental risks and increasing community engagement.

2. Acquire management support

Studies have shown that without serious support from management, the majority of sustainability initiatives will fail. Ideally it is best to assign one senior executive who can oversee and champion the plan. In addition, it is essential that the entire executive team be accountable for the sustainability objectives and initiatives. Without their support, other tasks and priorities will supersede the sustainability objectives.

3. Get a 'green team' involved

Green teams are formal committees of selected staff within an organization who have been appointed or have an interest in the environment and social programs. Establishing a green team can help get projects developed and implemented quickly. Employees understand the company and its operations well, and embedding these teams can be one of the best sources of innovation and plan development.

4. Align with current business objectives

Taking the green step doesn't mean that initiatives need to be separate or different from the current company's business objectives. Use the company's current business objectives and determine ways in which they could be enhanced or implemented with social or environmental measures added.

5. Collect baseline benchmark data

Gather current company data that provides information on environmental and social benchmarks. This could include energy, water and waste bills, materials consumption, purchasing records, donation amounts and any other records that might provide baselines on the company's current use of resources and social programs. This data will help establish measurable objectives for each possible initiative. Measuring the results of sustainability initiatives will assist in measuring the success and the future direction of sustainability programs.

6. Start small

Developing sustainability plans doesn't have to be large or complex initially. Choose one or two key projects based on benchmark findings and current business objectives. Each year build on those successes and focus on another two areas.

7. Analyze cost-benefits

Determine which areas in your company are most greatly affected by environmental concerns and where the best economic opportunities lie. Identify all foreseeable costs, benefits and environmental impacts associated with each possible project.

8. Identify resources

Engage outside help. The sustainability topic is broad and vast, and many companies face challenges in starting or improving their sustainability efforts because of lack of existing knowledge within the company. Consider collaboration with nonprofit organizations, government agencies and outside consulting firms.

9. Plan periodic reviews

In addition to an annual review, determine the best method for periodic follow-ups with each project initiative. Being able to address problems and issues immediately will help create long-term and sustainable success.

10. Educate and engage all staff

Once a sustainability plan has been developed, educate the entire staff on its purpose and goals to create accountability company-wide. Continue to engage staff in other ways by holding informal idea-exchange meetings, adding environmental reminders to company newsletters, offering membership in sustainability-related organizations, and including sustainability goals into performance plans.

Developing a sustainability plan does not need to take up an extensive amount of time or resources. It is better to take small steps than no steps at all. Focus on those areas that will bring the most value to the business economically and environmentally.

Each Colorado company can make a significant impact through implementing a sustainability plan. It reflects a positive image not only on the company but on our Colorado community as well.

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