



Speaking Green

Spreading the word about sustainability initiatives may fall to more than one department, but human resources plays an important role.

By **Matt Bolch**

HR Magazine, June 2008

<http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/articles/0608/0608bolch.asp>

It's good to be green, as businesspeople demonstrate by adopting environmentally responsible practices. But to succeed with green initiatives -- also called sustainability efforts -- an organization must make its mission clear to its partners, the broader community and particularly employees. In short, being green requires communication.

Employers committed to sustainability should keep employees informed of the strengths of company programs and the unmet challenges, says **K.J. McCorry, president of Officiency**, a workplace efficiency and productivity consultancy in Boulder, Colo. "A successful effort requires ground-level support. Those people know their jobs best and can grow support."

The environmental movement has been going on for 30 years, but it's finally poised to take off, McCorry says. Reasons include:

- Consumers' awareness of environmental issues.
- Dramatic data about possible global warming.
- Demands from companies such as Wal-Mart that suppliers and vendors adopt eco-friendly practices.

It is important for human resource professionals to have conversations with employees and the community at large about the implications of environmental initiatives, McCorry says.

Communication can mean the difference between success and failure of a project, says Bettina Neidhardt, portfolio manager for the American Management Association's leadership development seminars. The association's new three-day "Green Leadership: Implementing Sustainability Strategies" workshop was developed in conjunction with the Institute for Sustainable Enterprise, based at the Florham-Madison campus of Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey.

"There's a fine line between telling people what to do and urging them to do the right thing," Neidhardt says. "Communications cannot be directive but must cascade through an organization."

What's more, experts say, communication about sustainability must be honest. Organizations that stretch the truth about their products or their environmental practices risk being accused of "greenwashing."

Human Resources' Message

Communication about eco-friendly programs can originate in various places in an organization. McCorry has seen communication led by HR, finance, operations, the chief financial officer and an information technology specialist. At Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., communication about sustainability comes from a 10-year employee who recently completed her doctorate in environmental engineering.

Andrea George was serving as sustainability coordinator, working mainly in environmental compliance, when Vanderbilt named her director of its Office of Sustainability and Environmental Management, created Jan. 1. She is responsible for coordinating initiatives that have sprung up around campus.

"We take a 'triple bottom line' approach" -- a reference to the international standard of "people, planet, profit" -- George says. "We don't practice sustainability to look good or for the press. We do what's good for the environment, makes people happy and makes financial sense for Vanderbilt University."

Looking across the university, George noticed departments and groups of students recycling here and there, a student-led biodiesel effort and other programs, but no central coordination or publicity. With the assistance of the associate dean and a group of students at the Owen Graduate School of Management, she put together a business plan that included a branding effort and a web site, SustainVU.

George works closely with the News and Public Affairs Department to write press releases and coordinate news coverage, but she notes that an effective relationship with HR is vital. "HR is a key player on a number of sustainability programs, including the university telecommuting policy and the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority] Free Ride to Work Program," she says. "They're offered as HR benefits and as ways to keep cars off campus to reduce air pollution."

In March, the university announced an HR-led effort called "Don't Take Our Advice," encouraging employees to suppress the printing of their pay advices, an effort that could save the university significant personnel resources while saving a forest of trees. In a press release, George explained the pluses: "If we reach the goal of eliminating 10,000 pay advices per month, we could potentially save 8,000 pounds of wood and almost 7,000 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions per year just from reduced paper use, not including transportation or printing impact."

Employees, university partners and the public stay up-to-date on sustainability programs at Vanderbilt through a comprehensive communication plan that includes campus publications, internal e-mails, press releases, the university's main web site, the SustainVU site, the VUCast News Network, employee fairs and other events.

"We try to hit all of those outlets throughout the year," George says -- "anything to keep the conversation going and spawn another great idea."

Regardless of what department handles a company's sustainability programs, the chief executive officer should be involved in at least a symbolic role, says Peter Morrissey, chief executive officer of Morrissey & Co., an independent public relations and strategic communications consulting firm in Boston.

These programs provide the opportunity to "set the culture and vision around behaviors a company would like employees to emulate," Morrissey says. "Actions always speak louder than words, and any program should be practical, appropriate, fit with the culture and set reasonable goals." Morrissey bought two bicycles for employees to use for short trips and often can be seen wheeling about town himself while wearing a jacket and tie. (For another example of such leadership, see "[Eco-Voices at the Top](#).")

The Deciding Factor

Nordic Naturals, a Watsonville, Calif., manufacturer of more than 80 fish-oil products, considers its 80 employees ambassadors for the company's green practices, says Jennifer Canfield, SPHR, HR manager. "Communications about the environment happen daily as customer service and sales reps engage our clients," says Canfield, who has seen the number of employees at the organization double in her three years there. "In every presentation we make, we talk about our environmental commitment."

Canfield educates employees about the company's values during orientation, but employees live those standards daily by, for example, using stainless steel and eco-friendly disposable cutlery, recycling, putting up posters on environmental products, and even going through the trash for recyclables.

The sustainability message permeates the company. Founder and CEO Joar Opheim, for example, negotiated directly with fishermen in the waters off Norway to obtain the Arctic cod livers that they had been throwing overboard.

Spurring Confidence

The year-old Green Team at UMB Bank in Kansas City, Mo., has a quarterback and a cheerleader combined in CEO Mariner Kemper, says Shannon Johnson, senior vice president. "He's probably our biggest champion and is nearly the No. 1 contributor of ideas," she says.

The 30-member Green Team's nascent efforts already have paid dividends. UMB Bank, with 3,500 employees and operations in seven states, placed first among 20 Kansas City-area companies in the Mid-America Regional Council's "Take a Break from the Exhaust" challenge. Associates were asked to use alternate transportation methods and other creative ways to reduce pollution in Kansas City for nine months. Nearly 150 associates took the challenge, reducing their number of miles by more than

Eco-Voices at the Top

At Milliken & Co., a privately held textile and chemical manufacturer based in Spartanburg, S.C., the leading eco-voice belongs to the chairman, Roger Milliken. His commitment to the environment encompasses product design and manufacturing as well as facilities operations. Milliken Floor Covering products are third-party-certified to the highest green standards, for example. The floor covering division has not had to send product waste to a landfill since 1999, and it has reduced water and energy consumption by 50 percent since 1995 while increasing production.

Milliken & Co. has a history of environmental consciousness that dates to 1900, says Bill Gregory, director of sustainability. Gregory, who has been with the company since 1971, has led many sustainability projects, pulling people in from other departments as appropriate. But this spring, Milliken & Co. will be putting together a dedicated department to initiate, coordinate and communicate the company's green programs.

Gregory says the company spends \$500,000 to \$1 million annually on data gathering and communication for its eco-efforts, including research, white papers, public relations, Internet communications and events.

None of these big-picture projects could have succeeded without significant employee contributions and effort, Gregory says. Yet the company also focuses on individual, departmental and subsidiary efforts to maintain awareness of sustainability. Under its "Respect Our Earth" program, for example, employees at the Milliken Design Center in La Grange, Ga., held a holiday tree-decorating contest that stressed recycled and repurposed decorations and raised money for United Way.

Milliken & Co. plans to publish a sustainability report and to inaugurate periodic meetings of a Sustainable Leadership Forum. The group of 25 top company officials will focus on continuing green efforts while hosting guest speakers to challenge Milliken & Co. to do even more.

125,000 and their volatile organic compounds by 224,000 grams.

Monthly messages of an environmental nature are sent to employees, and workers also visit the Green Works intranet site to find company and community environmental resources. Managers have an online green resource too, and information on it can be disseminated in staff meetings or posted in work areas. Posters highlight initiatives and upcoming events, and a dedicated e-mail address for comments is routed to the marketing communications department for follow-up by the Green Team, which is made up of associates from across departments and regions.

The team employs a three-pronged approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, including associate engagement, facilities use and community outreach.

Shaw Industries Group Inc. also strives to engage workers at every level and incorporate green thinking throughout the organization. Employees might have blue-collar or white-collar jobs, but they're all involved in green projects, says Paul Richard, vice president of HR for the Dalton, Ga.-based flooring manufacturer. "We don't want to change the vision based on the audience," Richard says of its sustainability message, which carries the Shaw Green Edge banner both internally and externally. "The message should be relevant to employees and their line of sight."

While office employees may focus on paper recycling, plant workers concentrate on waste reduction and quality improvement. At the same time, the sales force may focus on spreading the Shaw sustainability message to customers, Richard explains.

Communication is handled in a coordinated manner by the communications and sustainability and environmental affairs groups. Employee communications originate in HR, where professionals added several questions about environmental responsibility to employee surveys starting in 2006.

"Employees told us that the environment is an important issue and they felt good about Shaw and the products we sell," Richard says. "Any time you can align corporate goals to a topic of interest among employees, you'll have a more engaged workforce."

Shaw promotes its environmental mission internally through newsletters, bulletin board postings, in-house televisions in break rooms and the company intranet. Whether in an office, a manufacturing facility or a warehouse, every Shaw worker is involved in an environmental project that can be as simple as recycling containers in the break room.

Shaw's leaders remain convinced that a commitment to the environment pays dividends in the consumer space and helps cement the company's reputation as an employer of choice. Attracting and retaining the best talent has become a key strategic objective.

"We make sure our associates are aware of what we're doing with marketing materials, consumer web sites and associations such as the HGTV Green Home giveaway," Richard says. "We have 31,000 ambassadors -- our associates who talk with family and friends about what Shaw is doing to help the planet."

The author is an Atlanta-based freelance writer and business journalist.