How Can One Develop ‘Sustainability Leaders’?
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In the end it’s all about people. We say that, but do we believe it? One of the most critical elements of building a corporate culture around sustainability thinking that is lacking in many companies is an ‘on purpose’ plan to develop the understanding and commitment of both senior leaders and the entire line organization.

As a first and very important step, evaluate your existing organization by assigning green, yellow and red dots to the organization chart. The red dots are for people who doubt the need or benefits of adopting sustainability as a framework for business growth. The green dots are for your sustainability champions. The yellow dots are for everyone else. This exercise is not about good people and bad people but about the type of training and experiences you might want to create for people who are in different places with respect to sustainability thinking. By the way, everyone knows who is where on the spectrum from doubter to champion – this process just provides a visual aid to begin a development plan for each individual.

Typically, organizations have 15 - 20% each of green dots and red dots with everyone else yellow. The yellow dots tend to watch the greens and reds and follow whichever group tends to more successful. If your organization says it is committed to sustainability and the reds get promoted over the greens, the people see the disconnect right away. Alignment of the ‘talk’ with the ‘walk’ is critically important to building an aligned and committed organization.

The red dots are a really important group. They ask lots of questions and want to know the business case for utilizing sustainability practices. When told the case is built on ‘intangibles’ and that it is the ‘non-financial’ aspects of the business, it just reinforces to them that sustainability programs are an ‘add-on’ to the business and not the hardcore business itself. Good financial numbers are critical to this group of people which usually includes both the business leaders and the finance people who are at the forefront of being personally rewarded for meeting the financial expectations of the shareholders.

The green dots are also very important. They are your sustainability culture champions for whatever reason and can reside anywhere in the organization. In leading companies the CEO is usually a green dot. However, having a few ‘green’ business leaders, and a ‘green’ chief financial officer, is worth its weight in gold.

The yellow dots wait and see. If it looks like the sustainability approach will become a mainstream value or framework, they will move quickly to get on board. If they see it as a fad or ‘program of the month’ they will just wait until it passes.

Now, let’s talk about four specific groups:

**Successful Business Green Dots** – this is a group of senior people in Business Management, Research & Development, Sales / Marketing and Finance who see the tangible benefits of adopting sustainability practices throughout the business process. Be sure these people are those who are very successful in their assigned role. Use this group both internally and externally to demonstrate the importance and benefits of sustainability practices in their businesses. Use them as speakers, teachers / trainers and representatives to external groups, etc. Feature them in company publications and network news. Keep them very visible. They bring a validation that sustainability thinking is important to business in a way that the sustainability / EHS people cannot.
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The Green-Leaning Yellow Dots – these are people in all functions who want to see sustainability practices be successful for either tangible or intangible reasons. They can’t exactly explain why yet so they need some training and development. Involve this group in internal and external training; help them establish contacts and relationships with some of the thought leaders in the public sector, put them to work on developing the tangible business case for a business with which they are associated. Have the senior ‘green dot’ leaders establish mentoring roles with people in this group. Experience indicates that, as they themselves establish the tangible reasons for adopting sustainability practices, these ‘green-leaning yellow dots’ will become the ‘green dots’ of the future.

The Converted Red Dots – much like the reformed alcoholic or smoker, the people in this group who, for whatever reason, become ‘green dots’ tend to take on the role of evangelist. Many ‘red dot’ people do not convert, but some do and for various reasons. Some read a compelling book, hear an inspirational speaker, study the science, or have a life-changing experience like the birth of their first grandchild. The real key in working with this group is to understand how they learn and what data or experiences may be most influential with them. Once converted, the real challenge with this group is to help them focus their energy in areas important to the change process and not pursue sustainability solely as an isolated and theoretical discipline.

The Young Promotables (All Dots) – these are the next generation of leaders, the group that needs to be trained, engaged, given external exposure and put to work on applying sustainability thinking in their ‘day job.’ Building a sustainability framework into your company’s leadership development program will ensure that all young promotables are exposed to the power of sustainability as part of their normal development process. Have them organize sustainability networks, town meetings, speakers series, field trips and other activities to build understanding, excitement and, over time, full integration of sustainability thinking and action. This is also a great group for mentoring by the senior green dots.

A few people make things happen; a larger number watch things happen; and the great majority have no idea what happened. Create a plan to develop your current and future leaders. There is nothing more important.