



GEMI Emerging Sustainability Leadership Work Group (GEMI ESL) 2022

Vision

Provide a safe space for experienced and emerging corporate sustainability leaders to connect and learn from their peers, share experiences in managing and leading through ever increasing pressures facing sustainability leaders today, and develop capabilities required to lead sustainable business into the future.

Mission

Create a forum that crosses both sectors and experience levels, enabling newer sustainability leaders to learn from experience while more experienced leaders can gain fresh perspectives and insights. The forum will focus on the emerging challenges that all sustainability leaders face, including building the right sustainability strategy for each particular business; making the business case; identifying, enlisting and engaging senior champions; goal setting; mentoring the next generation; and engaging with key stakeholders including investors.

Background

In 2021, GEMI convened an Emerging Sustainability Leaders work group. The group included EHS/ESG leaders from four different cohorts:

- **“Rising” ESG leaders**, respected staff with great background and preparation, but less exposure to senior management and strategy, less network internally and externally (*generational change*);
- **Lateral leaders**, moving into ESG from other corporate functions, bringing great insight into their own company and getting things done, but learning the basics of ESG;
- **Evolving EHS leaders**, seasoned, skilled veterans at “internalizing externalities” but facing new content and context; and
- **Veteran ESG leaders**, well-experienced but having to rethink long-standing programs and roles in light of newly energized players (e.g. investors), broader portfolios (e.g. DE&I), more urgency (e.g. climate), and higher expectations and attention across the board (and sometimes across the Board).

Together, Work Group participants explored the range of structures and ESG leadership roles across their companies; challenges in executing ESG leadership roles; and challenges in getting, keeping and growing in senior ESG leadership roles.

The Work Group explored important issues around delivery and progress in key ESG roles including:

- Responding to the external stakeholders who are driving many of the increased expectations, especially investors and customers.
- Being able to focus and prioritize. Short-term demands can distract us from long-term priorities. Maintaining long-term focus is difficult. The multiple ESG reporting regimes work against that.
- Getting buy-in and participation from people inside the company – and managing the fragmented energy once people do buy in. Coordinating colleagues’ well-intentioned but unguided (or misguided) energy is draining, including learning how to manage without discouraging.
- Obtaining funding, including discussion that funding barriers may be less about absolute dollars and more about who will pay, how, and how the cost will be justified.
- Using enablers to help overcome or get around barriers, including engagement from the top; benchmarking peers both for learning and to show people inside your company what other



companies are already doing; and building on past successes patiently. Access to top management, and the ability to escalate issues if and when needed, is crucial.

The Work Group also shared insights into challenges in getting, keeping and growing in key ESG roles including the ways in which:

- These are difficult and exhausting jobs. At the same time, the career path for ESG leaders is ill-defined and uncertain.
- ESG leadership roles evolve. They may be created around one issue but become “sticky” and take on more issues over time, especially as issues evolve from “nice to haves” to business imperatives.
- Much of the corporate value from senior ESG leaders may come from the collaborative, integrative “horizontal” **role** they play, above and beyond their actual HR-approved **position**.
- Relationships are key to that collaborative role and can’t be jeopardized: “I don’t take pride of ownership.”
- Advancement – both of the ESG role and personally – may require advocating for yourself, to communicate that value to the right people.

What will the GEMI Emerging Sustainability Leadership Work Group Do in 2022?

The work group will take advantage of the different cohorts’ perspectives and experience to help participants better address the challenges identified in the 2021 project in their own companies and careers. The work group activities will have two phases in 2022:

- In Q1, the GEMI ESL will codify and clarify the learnings from the 2021 workshops by:
 - Surveying a broader range of GEMI members, to test and amplify key learnings across a larger and more diverse sample than just the active 2021 participants; and
 - Distilling lessons-learned from the 2021 project and 2022 surveying into some kind of reference document or tool.
- In Qs 2-3, the GEMI ESL will hold quarterly workshops (planned for now as virtual) to accelerate focused learning and sharing around the challenges.
 - Priorities for the workshops will be driven by the Q1 results and participants’ needs.
 - Each workshop will feature at least one “live case study,” with candid presentations and conversations with emerging sustainability leaders in a variety of sectors and corporate settings.
 - Some industry representatives from other relevant functions (e.g. Investor Relations or HR) may be invited to participate in candid discussions in some Workshops, to help participants better understand the perspectives of those functions and how best to collaborate with them.

How will the GEMI ESL operate?

The GEMI ESL will be led by GEMI members and supported by GEMI’s staff with the support of Scott Nadler, Nadler Strategy LLC.

What will be the cost to participate in the GEMI ESL?

GEMI Members will be able to participate in the work group as part of their membership contributions to GEMI. GEMI dues are \$12,500. Companies and organizations choosing not to become a member of GEMI may join as participants in the work group alone for 2022, for a fee of \$4,500.

To learn more about how to participate, contact Steve Hellem at shellem@navista.net