

CORPORATE EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS: COMMUNICATING BEYOND THE GREEN WALL

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Environmental managers often speak of the need to disseminate sustainable business thinking throughout a company, of communicating beyond the "green wall". Some refer to this process as an organizational "sea change." Others have noted that the introduction of sustainable business thinking "cannot be done by fiat. It must be top down...and bottom up." Others note that "It's about organizational learning, not pockets of groups making progress and others not."

With these statements in mind, I recently conducted a pilot survey of a dozen companies from a variety of different industries. I set out to discover what companies were doing to educate employees about environmental problems. What activities and programs were supporting the kind of organizational changes cited above?

I discovered a range of educational programs in progress across industries and companies. These programs vary in terms of the content of the programs, the delivery methods of the programs, and the extent of employee participation. The companies share common concerns about how best to achieve learning goals.

Sound educational rationales underlie these programs which are designed to complement technical training on EMS:

- Educational programs within corporations can send a message that top management believes in the importance of environmental initiatives.
- Employees who understand the "big picture" of environmental problems can be more conscientious implementers of an EMS,
- Employees that are knowledgeable about the impact of their business on the environment can be engaged in the challenge of innovating around environmental problems in a way that also supports the bottom line.

I've constructed a prototype that combines elements of various programs into a curriculum that is ideal from an educator's point of view. It begins with the big picture of the earth and its carrying capacity. Then the activities of the particular business and their impacts on ecosystems are placed in this context. Finally, the specific role of the employee in addressing environmental problems is spelled out. The description of this prototypical program is followed by frequently raised questions.

Program Content

1. Prepare the ground: Why the environment? Why now?

Before employees can begin learning about the environment and their business, obstacles to learning must be addressed. Obstacles may come as either skepticism (or downright denial) that environmental problems exist, or as a viewpoint that sees business and environmental interests as incompatible. Companies in my sample created readiness in their employees in various ways.

- Volvo's Dialogue for the Environment program confronts employees with the statement, "Working for the environment is not just a fashionable trend. It is a natural part of the work of many companies."
- Patagonia has a company-wide, worldwide event once a year on environmental issues. They cover the company's core values and a statement of purpose as well as a current topic each year. Sessions are on-site in small groups. Attendance is mandatory.
- Bethlehem Steel uses a video of the CEO to introduce their sessions and to emphasize the importance that the company places on environmental issues.
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The **goal** of this introductory part of the program is to create a vision of business as a partner in working toward environmental sustainability. Student employees may remain skeptical at this point, but that's OK.

2. Develop Ecological Literacy: Why should business be concerned about the natural environment?

An ideal program progresses to "Environmental Literacy." This part of the program reviews some of the basics of ecological science. Included may be material on ecosystems, carbon cycles, photosynthesis, the hydrological cycle and thermodynamics. This basic ecological literacy forms the foundation for understanding how human industrial activity may have disrupted natural cycles. Volvo, for example, includes information on some of the most publicized environmental problems, such as climate change, air and water pollution, acid rain, and decline in biodiversity.

The **goal** of this part of the curriculum is to create awareness of the impact of human, industrial activity on the earth, and to stir in participants a sense of urgency to change industrial practices to lighten the footprint of business activity.

Some companies use off-the-shelf tools, such as The Natural Step, or the CERES Principles to cover the ground of this part of the curriculum. Others develop their own in-house materials.

- Volvo's program, Dialogue for the Environment covers environmental science topics, such as photosynthesis, cell respiration, and ecosystems.
- HP, Pfizer and Starbucks include material on environmental issues in orientation sessions for new hires.

- DuPont runs a one-day session for product stewards from each of 90 business units that focuses on stewardship of the earth, life cycle analysis, and designing to eliminate environmental impact.
- Patagonia sends people out into the environmental community on voluntary internships. The interns then report back to Patagonia, keeping the company up-to-date on emerging issues.

3. Relate environmental problems to the company's business: What is the environmental footprint of our business?

A second content area is more directly related to the particular company and industry in question. This part of the curriculum focuses the more general knowledge of the previous section on the particular environmental issues most directly impacted by the business at hand.

- Volvo's Dialogue for the Environment, for example, notes that "transport accounts for one half of oil consumption." And that the "New situation calls for a new approach". It outlines the use of busses in developing countries, such as Mexico, India and Brazil.
- Starbucks teaches employees about shade-grown coffee and how sourcing this type of coffee bean helps to prevent loss of rain forests and the biodiversity supported by those ecosystems.

The **goal** of this part of the curriculum is to enable employees to understand the rationale for the environmental management systems that they will be asked to implement. Also, this material engages employees in the process of dreaming up creative solutions to environmental problems that the business is facing now and into the future.

4. Provide information specific to an employee's role: What systems are in place to lessen the footprint of our business? What specific role do I play in its implementation?

This part of the curriculum would vary depending on the particular job of the employee. The **goal** of this part of the curriculum is for employees to understand their role in diminishing the company's environmental footprint, and to gain the specific knowledge they need to do their part. An engineer may need instructions for implementing environmental management systems. A marketing manager may need a briefing on the latest research concerning green consumers.

Messages may be tailored to the particular employee's role. At HP, for example, an Environmental Strategy and Business Solutions Council brings together representatives from different business disciplines. "So to marketing we talk about customer expectations, to a R&D manager we talk about customer's concerns about energy performance, to services and support we talk about product take-back. We tailor the message to each group."

- Environment staff at Sunoco communicates with maintenance people to initiate thinking about how to redesign equipment to prevent environmentally damaging leaks and spills.

- Pfizer has developed a matrix of jobs x information. Depending on the type of job, an employee receives the information they need.
- Starbucks sends people to conferences in their own professions. A design professional, for example, talked to peers in design. He came back with new green specs for the headquarters building.

FAQ's

No well-worn road map exists for these programs. Companies in the survey faced common dilemmas. Here are the most frequently asked questions.

Why not just skip to the last phase? Isn't that all you need?

Many companies find that technical training is not enough to inspire a "culture change" and sustainable business thinking among employees. Technical requirements of an EMS may be carried out in a perfunctory way when employees do not fully understand why they are being asked to participate in creating a more sustainable business. While technically trained, they may lack motivation to go the extra mile. Furthermore, they may not be thinking about how to improve environmental performance continuously.

How do you alter the content and delivery of programs to accommodate employees at different levels of the organization?

Most companies noted differences in programs targeted for upper management and for rank-and-file employees. Management programs often had an off-site component. At DuPont an annual management seminar tours a site of environmental interest, like the new England fisheries, to learn about how another community solved their environmental problems. Luncheon speakers were common delivery methods for executive education. Pfizer schedules luncheons for upper management with speakers on environmental topics. Starbucks' managers are self-selected to receive training as a member of the company "Green Team."

Which works best? Face-to-face sessions or putting material on the intranet?

In the beginning face-to-face contact is preferable. Both educators and participating employees are on a steep learning curve at this stage. At Bethlehem Steel, for example, communications professionals quickly learned to avoid the term, "sustainable development," by watching the eyes of participants glaze over when these words were spoken -- visual cues that would be lost with an intranet program.

Later when the program is more established, a company's intranet may be used with successful learning outcomes. Electrolux, for example relies on the company intranet for their environmental education program, Eco Know How. At Bethlehem Steele learning modules are posted on the intranet after they have been presented in face-to-face sessions. HP uses the intranet to post timely information rather than conceptual material, and for manuals, such as environmental standards worldwide. Patagonia has an electronic bulletin board on the environment for posting current developments.

How do I know if my program is effective? How can I assess learning outcomes?

Outcomes assessment was on the wish list at some companies. Examples of assessment procedures were evident at others. At Starbucks environmental concerns are part of the budget process. A budget review will ask, "What are you doing to advance the goal of diminishing the environmental footprint"? Bethlehem Steel interviews employees after training sessions. They also have a link on the intranet website that allows employees to ask questions. Questions are then used to revise the training curriculum. Sunoco uses pilot programs to launch and fine tune new educational initiatives.

I don't have a program. Where is the best place to begin?

Begin with something that makes sense for your particular company. At Coca Cola environmental issues are discussed during training sessions for customer service employees that staff the 1-800-GET COKE hot line. These employees must be prepared to answer caller's questions concerning recycling and other environmental issues.

Understanding the connections between business and the natural environment requires systems thinking. Management thinker, Peter Senge, notes that

"...we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved."

Ideal corporate education programs introduce employees to the whole system, rather than just their part. This kind of learning can create employees who are partners in solving the problem of how to enhance the business while diminishing its environmental footprint.