

How to Build a Green Team: The First Step to Sustainability

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Long-term sustainable growth is important to building a successful company. In the final installment of her four-part series "Growing a Green Corporation: Meeting the Next Great Disruptive Challenge of the 21st Century," Brandi McManus provides a blueprint for building a green team. Here are [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#) of her series.

How to Build a Green Team: The First Step to Sustainability

In the first three parts of this series on how to grow a green corporation, we discussed why it is important to build sustainability into your business plan, how you might assess the positive and negative impacts of sustainability and the different levels of sustainability (or shades of green). So how do you take the first step? How do you create an environmental program with employee support and buy-in that creates lasting changes in your business?

Growing A Green Corporation

This four-part series covers ...

- Reading the Signs of Change
- Assessing the Impacts of Environmental Pressure
- Investing in Sustainability: Shades of Green
- Building Your Green Team

The best place to start is by collecting a group of individuals in your organization who have some passion about the topic of green or the environment. Let's call it your Green Team. But before launching this team, here are some ground rules to ensure success.

Rules of the Green Team

To begin on the path to corporate environmental responsibility, it is important to begin with a frank, executive-level discussion about where you are and where you want to be. Not every company will want to transform its business model to begin offering eco-friendly cars and renewable energy. However, it is possible that every company could fix the basics and take steps toward reducing its impact on the world.

Rule 1: Executive support - One member of the team must be from the executive staff to show not only executive buy-in but also have access to the management team so that decisions can be made quickly. The goal of this group member is to:

- Listen openly to ideas from the team
- Guide discussions toward actionable plans
- Set expectations for direction of the team and funding

Rule 2: Commitment - The executive team must commit to reviewing the suggestions and discoveries

of the team with the intention to take action. All your employees will be watching the actions of this team. If every idea is swatted down by management, then you may be doing more harm than good to morale. Make sure that this team is empowered to make real change in your organization.

Rule 3: Diversity - Other members of the team should be from different divisions and groups and hold positions. Have one person from sales, operations, manufacturing/quality, human resources, accounting and maybe even the receptionist. You can designate these members or ask for volunteers to get the most passionate and engaged people involved in your team.

Rule 4: Size - Limit the size of the team to 10 to 12 people. While this number may seem small for very large organizations, it is very difficult to get anything accomplished in very large teams. However, while the team is small, it is possible to have the delegate from manufacturing create his own small team in his group to give him ideas to bring back to the group.

Rule 5: Unleash the creativity of your people - This is one excellent opportunity to tap the resources that companies spend billions to recruit and retain. Encourage the team to think of creative ideas to reduce waste and energy or increase the durability of products. Make it clear that this is not just a cost-cutting exercise but a way to increase the value of your products while having an impact on the planet.

What should the team do?

In the first meeting, the team can start with a discussion of the [four levels of green companies](#) discussed earlier in this series. Are you a Level 1 now and want to be a Level 3? Are you a Level 3 now and just want to find undiscovered opportunities? Make sure that you get the opinion of every team member to see the perspective of the employees. It is possible that the company is already doing very good things that do not get attention.

Inside your company. The next steps of the team could take time -- maybe a few months or even a couple of years. You can think of the team as going on a business trip. You must first think about where you are going and what you will need when you get there. Next, you must plan activities for your trip and create a budget for the trip. You also need to ask yourself what will happen if something goes wrong on this trip. How will you get help or change course? Let's begin the journey of the green team.

First, fix the basics:

This is one area where the team should have plenty of ideas. The basics include recycling programs and basic energy efficiency measures. This might involve a basic environmental awareness program for all employees to understand the impact of their choices on the environment. The company intranet or email could be used for the environmental tip of the week. Team leaders could be equipped to deliver tips at their weekly meetings.

Employees could be encouraged to only print what is needed and all printers set to default to two-sided printing. Have a brainstorming session with the green team, and I am sure there will be many ideas. If you run out of options, Google "green your business." When I harnessed the power of Google to test it, I received more than 33 million results in .08 seconds.

Next, begin looking at the long road:

These are options within [Level 2](#) and [Level 3](#) of the green business. These opportunities may or may not require investment but will have the largest impact on your business and environmental impact. This step may include mapping the value chain of your products and services or completing a lifecycle assessment. You may recruit other employees and experts in processes to come in and speak to the team. Another option is to hire consultants to look into your business but remember that no one knows your business like you do. Partner with external experts in each area of your business for energy reduction and manufacturing changes. They will have ideas from other businesses or even competitors that will help you on your journey.

This chart, which appeared in Part 3 of the series, shows the levels of sustainability investments and efforts that can be made by companies.

Outside the company. When you have addressed your most urgent business issues, have your team start looking for the Green Wave, the business transformation opportunity that is on the horizon in your industry. This will come from new and evolving standards in your industry, legislation, competitors' products or completely new ideas entirely. These opportunities would include making sustainability a part of your strategic long-term plan. You may need to change the way you research, develop, manufacture, sell, operate, install, and manage. Finding the next wave requires out of the box thinking. An easy place to start would be any area where the company has been in trouble, or when a competitor has been targeted. These areas of turmoil could be viewed as opportunities to transform your business, increase revenue and increase market share while focusing on long-term profitability.

This is one subject you cannot Google. You cannot predict the next Prius. But you have put together the right team. The members know your business and can see the opportunity. Go off site for a day or two. Think. Dream. Imagine.

Have a Plan B. Last, create some contingency plans. Something could always go wrong. Maybe you won't meet your recycling goal. What if the facility reduces its energy use and the price of energy doubles? Make these questions part of your planning. Will you abandon the initiative and try something else? Will you stick with it for a year and try to make it work? As the company implements these projects, make sure that the team and the executive committee is fully aware of the upsides, downsides and risks.

Make Suggestions for the Company

It is not important for the green team to complete this entire process before making suggestions to the executive team. It would be better to make a presentation and recommendation after each of the steps above. The presentation for each suggestion should include:

- A clear simple definition of the action taken (one sentence or less)
- A quantifiable benefit that the company will receive from implementing the action along with intangible benefits (employee satisfaction, morale)
- An outline of the costs of the program
- Summary of the risks associated with the action
- How the action will be tracked, measured and reported to the executive team and employees

As we read before in Levels 3 and 4, some projects may not have an immediate and quantifiable benefit, or the benefit could hold more risk (new product development). However, there will always be a benefit in terms of positive market perception, employee satisfaction and reduced risk of customer uproar, for example. There is a value in those items to the executive team, and the team's executive sponsor can help.

Here is an example:

- **Action:** Reduce the energy intensity of our product.
- **Benefit:** Reduce cost of energy by \$.03 per item, resulting in total company benefit of \$ 30,000 per year.
- **Outline:** Initial cost of \$100,000 with annual savings of \$30,000 resulting in a 3.33 year simple payback (You can go to <http://www.teachmefinance.com/> to learn about how to calculate financial benefits to the company.)
- **Risks:** Rising prices of energy could decrease benefit. You could also outline here how much energy costs have risen in the past several years and what impact you think this risk may have.
- **Tracking:** Energy use will be tracked and reported quarterly.

Other recommendations could include:

- Reduce the material intensity of goods and services
- Reduce toxic dispersion
- Enhance material recyclability
- Maximize use of renewable resources
- Extend product durability
- Increase service intensity of products

Celebrate success!

The most important action of the green team is to celebrate environmental success. This could be on the company intranet or employee newsletter. The company could create press releases or a customer letter explaining what it is doing to help the environment. At this point, the team has worked hard, and the company must celebrate wins to continue success and encourage employees to keep taking steps toward environmental sustainability for the company and for themselves.

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