

Embedding sustainability: Make managers leaders

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Mallen Baker sketches out a route for getting corporate responsibility to exactly where it should be in your business

Although many companies have made a commitment to corporate responsibility and sustainability, very few have taken this to the heart of their business. And by that, I mean into the core of their business strategy.

All those people who make the statement that “CR is part of our corporate DNA” generally mean that they’ve achieved (sometimes only in their own heads) a degree of consistency in getting better behaviours among staff across the business.

That’s great. It’s hard to do. I would never do it down. But the gulf that remains is the one between management and leadership.

Most of the tools of corporate responsibility – the frameworks, the indices, the committee-approved lists of KPIs and the reports – are tools of management. They ensure that existing processes are continually improved to produce a bit less carbon, to run fewer risks of things going wrong, and to motivate employees a bit more.

They don’t challenge the business to find new, disruptive sustainable business models. They don’t engage the business in the big issues of society as an active corporate citizen, playing its part in solving problems.

It’s why, while many businesses have heads of CR, sustainability, CSR or citizenship, very few have people in that role who could really be called “chief sustainability officers” – people who can talk with their c-suite peers in the company at this strategic level.

Making this shift comes down to the nature of the internal goals you set yourself. One of them should be this: to make corporate citizenship a natural part of leadership. To be successful there are some key stages in the process.

Firstly, any new CEO would be screened at the recruitment stage for a fit with the values of the business, and their ability to show leadership in that area. If the members of the board involved with choosing the CEO are indifferent to corporate citizenship as a factor, then every time there’s a change at the top you might as well toss a coin as to whether it will take you back to square one, or whether you’ll get a progressive leader who can move things forward.

Secondly, training within the business will make it clear that citizenship is an element that comes with top level leadership. Middle managers often think it’s all a waste of time because they believe they get rated on hitting the numbers and nothing else. Those that are smart enough to aspire to higher levels of progress within the company should come to understand that this is something that is essential – so showing initiative here is one good way to demonstrate leadership potential.

Don’t stress on location

Thirdly, where the CR/sustainability team is located within the business is not that important, because its role is defined as working across the business and it has the solid support of the operational directors to do so. Should it be located under HR? Should it be in marketing? That should just be a matter of where the desks are located, not where the operational focus lies.

That’s all very well, but that simply doesn’t describe my current existence, you might say.

Maybe not, but you need to know where you're going. They say that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step – well, so does a trip to the coffee machine. The direction of travel is what distinguishes them.

And to make this journey, there are a few particular steps.

Get the current leadership to see CR/sustainability more strategically. Either find excuses to network them with effective leaders from other businesses, or find other ways to expose them to the benefits of these behaviours.

Get the buy-in of the current leadership to build citizenship into how leaders are developed within the business. And, as a natural next step once that process has started, engage the chairman in how this should feed in to succession planning.

The current CR team – however it is framed – should set objectives for influencing certain key aspects for how the business operates, and make it their concern to get out to the business heads and win them over to those changes. They can be small victories to start with, but it is important there is engagement so the business heads see the CR team learning about their objectives, their problems, and finding ways in which the corporate responsibility agenda can help them to solve their problems.

It will change the way CR and sustainability is viewed within the business.

The argument that there should be a chief sustainability officer will now make much more sense. And then the real work can start.

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