



Community of Practice

Meaningful Stakeholder Dialogue

Deep dive – How to conduct internal engagement on sustainability?

17 June 2025

SER





Introduction

This is a publication related to the [Community of Practice \(CoP\)](#) on Meaningful Stakeholder Dialogue. The CoP is a platform for companies to develop their skills, exchange practical experiences, and jointly address challenges with peer companies and experts.

Internal Dialogue

For a meaningful dialogue with external stakeholders, it is essential to have a clear internal vision and strategy on sustainability. That's why this deep dive focuses on the internal dialogue on sustainability: how do you engage colleagues who aren't naturally enthusiastic? How do you build support and avoid sustainability becoming an isolated effort? There is a risk that sustainability remains confined to a specific department, such as CSR or HR, while it is crucial that all employees - from procurement to production and from sales to finance - work together. This requires a shared internal dialogue about what sustainability concretely means for the organisation and how everyone can contribute. In this deep dive, the topic will be explored through both theory and practical examples.

Behaviour Change Compass Tool: Behaviour as driver of structural change

Expert

Jasper de Haan – expert organisational science and change management at Highborg.

Jasper focuses on the question: how can we activate people and organisations? The key is not to dive straight into actions or measures, but to first pause and ask: what specific behaviour do we want to see, and from whom? Below are several insights.

Practical challenges in sustainable business

Based on a mini-survey among participants, several common challenges emerged. Many organisations want to become more sustainable but face obstacles such as:

- Sustainability is considered as something for the sustainability/HR team only
- Sustainable goals exist but are not embedded in operational steering
- Sustainability lacks urgency or accountability
- There's willingness, but no clear translation into changed behaviour
- Customers and/or employees aren't demanding it
- We're currently prioritising CSRD
- Our sustainability strategy and business strategy are two separate tracks
- Sustainability is perceived as costly and time-consuming.

Start with behaviour

A key message: many organisations skip the step of defining exactly what behaviour they expect from whom. Terms like “being sustainable” or “raising awareness” are not behaviours, they are outcomes of behaviour. Behaviour should be **concrete, observable, and verifiable**. It refers to visible actions and reactions in context. Only when you clarify the behaviour you want to see, can you deploy targeted interventions.

Examples:

- Instead of: “We want to integrate sustainability (ESG) into all processes,” say: “Buyers include sustainability criteria when selecting suppliers.”
- Instead of: “We want to actively offer sustainable products and raise consumer awareness,” say: “Sales advisors proactively promote sustainable products and inform customers about them.”

The behaviour change compass tool

To change behaviour, support is needed, and support doesn’t just appear on its own. Jasper introduces the Behaviour Change Compass, a tool that shows that “willingness to change” stems from four underlying factors. People are willing to change if they:

- Believe in the change
- Understand the change
- Have the ability to carry it out
- Feel supported in the process.

Interestingly, the mini-survey among participants revealed that ability is rarely the biggest bottleneck. Most organisations have the required knowledge and competencies. The real issue often lies in believing in the necessity or urgency of the change, or in the lack of support from management or systems.

What can you do?

Depending on the biggest barrier, different types of interventions are possible:

Understand	Ability	Believe	Feel supported
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategy map• Analysis presentations• Legitimise and rationalise• Pinpoint behaviour• Driver tree• Clarify assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Training• Competency matrix• Hire experts• Simulations• Feedback and clear goals• Clear roles and responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Change narrative• Share success stories• Keep promises• Storytelling• Role modeling by senior management• Sponsorship by leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Give compliments• Give attention• Integrate into team goals• Free up time• Provide resources• Reduce temptations for old behaviour

Four interventions explained

1. Driver Tree (Understand): This tool helps translate an abstract sustainability goal (e.g. “increase sustainable procurement”) into concrete behavioural drivers. Instead of jumping into campaigns, the driver tree maps what behaviour is needed and by whom. This creates shared understanding and enables interventions that serve multiple goals, such as sustainability and customer satisfaction.
2. Competency Matrix (Ability): The matrix clarifies what skills are needed for sustainable behaviour. Not just as a separate list for sustainability teams, but integrated into existing HR structures. It helps assess whether teams have the right skills and where development is needed.
3. Share successes and results (Believe): Sustainability goals are often long-term and abstract. Sharing interim results, for example via dashboards, boosts credibility and engagement. Managers who communicate openly about progress and challenges build trust and show that sustainability matters.
4. Embed in goals (Feel Supported): Sustainability becomes impactful only when it's integrated into standard steering mechanisms. Add sustainability targets and KPIs to OGSMs or annual plans. Embedding it in planning and accountability avoids it becoming a side issue and makes it a shared responsibility.

Five tips to embed sustainability in the core of your organisation

- Define the desired change as concretely as possible.
- Believe – assign a face and voice to the change, ideally someone in a senior role.
- Understand – translate what the change means per department and what behaviour it requires.
- Able – map required competencies and address development needs structurally.
- Support – embed sustainability goals into governance and decision-making.

In practice: gamification

Jasper shares a case from a large international company that used gamification to stimulate sustainable behaviour and raise awareness. By introducing game elements into daily work, employees were encouraged to set sustainability goals, give feedback, and learn from one another. All without lengthy or costly training.

How does gamification deal with varied roles (e.g. office staff vs. lab technicians)? That depends on the target behaviour. For very specific behaviours, customisation is needed. But when the goal is broader, such as every department defining what sustainability means for them, a general approach is possible. Functions like lab work may need tailored interventions compared to office-based roles.

While gamification alone won't lead to structural change, it can spark engagement and broaden support. Combined with embedding sustainability in strategy and developing skills, it can help turn behavioural change into lasting impact.

Employee engagement on sustainability – Lessons learned by Achmea

Expert

Jenneke den Bol – Project Lead “Achmea Samen Duurzaam” (Achmea Sustainable Together).

Jenneke shares her experience leading the “Internal Engagement” workstream at Achmea, a cooperative insurer active in seven countries. As the Netherlands' largest insurer, with 17,500 employees and significant assets under management, Achmea takes social responsibility seriously. “Living Sustainably Together” is at the heart of their mission. For Jenneke, activating employees is not a one-time campaign, but an ongoing process of structural embedding, storytelling, and tapping into intrinsic motivation.

A three-pronged approach: Head, Heart, Hands

Achmea's approach targets knowledge (head), motivation (heart), and action (hands). This includes continuous investment in information, inspiring communication, and developing employees' skills.

In practice: e-learning on sustainability

Achmea developed its own e-learning module as a foundational intervention. Built on the “think-feel-do” model, it aims to inform, inspire, and activate employees. A key question was whether to make it mandatory. Despite initial doubts, the HR Director advised making it compulsory, a decision that paid off: 14,000 colleagues have completed the training.

This debate highlights a central dilemma: mandating learning can clash with intrinsic motivation but also signals high priority. Achmea's approach included:

- Role modelling: leaders demonstrated commitment through time and resources
- Relatable content: both the CEO and diverse employees appeared in the training
- Space for criticism: employees could anonymously share how important they found sustainability
- Positive messaging: focused on what is possible, not just obligations

The rollout combined mandatory elements with positive incentives (e.g. gifts for pilot testers, team rewards), always paired with careful internal communication. After completion, feedback was used to identify further learning needs per function. Based on this, follow-up trainings were developed, e.g. around anti-greenwashing legislation or CSRD. All interventions contribute to Achmea's mission of "Living Sustainably Together."

In practice: internal communication and data-driven approaches

Jenneke stresses thoughtful communication and the use of data to drive engagement. Personal messaging such as "What do you stand for?" was repeated across interventions, supported by a hashtag. Storytelling played a major role: inspiring stories from employees encouraged others to shape their own sustainability narratives.

At the same time, measurement is key. Surveys assess motivation, knowledge, and permission (want-can-may model). A useful tip: sending surveys from the CEO boosts urgency and engagement. Data-driven insights help identify where to intervene for lasting behavioural change.

Challenge: middle management

One major challenge is middle management. While senior leaders are engaged and frontline employees motivated, middle managers often juggle many priorities. The goal: make sustainability part of their existing work, not an extra burden.

Achmea's key lessons

1. Storytelling matters: Help employees see their role in the bigger picture, without sounding preachy.
2. Repetition works: Stop communicating and sustainability disappears from view. Competing topics (e.g. AI) can distract.
3. Structural embedding: Integrate sustainability into governance and decision-making.
4. Formal and informal leadership: Directors who show intrinsic motivation are important, but so are "sustainable nomads", passionate employees who take initiative.
5. Behaviour over KPIs: People don't change because of targets. Translate ambitions into specific behaviours.
6. Cross-functional collaboration: Work with HR, Compliance, L&D, Communications, and business units. Sustainability touches all.
7. Follow the energy: Support departments that already feel the urgency. "Water the plants that are already sprouting".

Question by participant: how to handle anti-ESG sentiment?

A participant asked how to handle resistance toward ESG or sustainability among staff. Shared insights:

- Keep sharing positive stories and examples, even if there's pushback
- Share facts empathetically and leave room for emotions and concerns
- Engage in dialogue, listen to concerns, respond with openness and knowledge
- Accept that not everyone will be on board, tailor approaches for different mindsets (positive, neutral, hesitant, or resistant)

Training Teams – Lessons learned by Royal Ahrend

Expert

Lisanne Huizing – Sustainability Specialist at Royal Ahrend, a producer of modular and circular office furniture.

Lisanne works daily on bringing the sustainability strategy to life within the organisation, from executive level to the shop floor. Ahrend has firmly embedded sustainability in its organisational structure: since early last year, the sustainability team reports directly to the CEO, and a new sustainability strategy is in place. This demonstrates that sustainability is not a side issue, but a core element of the business.

For Ahrend, sustainability is not a luxury, it's a necessity. The numbers speak for themselves: the construction sector consumes 36% of the world's energy and 50% of all raw materials. For Ahrend, this means that 95% of its CO₂ emissions fall under scope 3: in the supply chain and products. This is why the company constantly looks for ways to improve the sustainability of its product portfolio. They work with modular design for easy repair, refurbish furniture in their own "circular hub," and partner with a social enterprise that recycles textile waste from the workshop into new products.

From sustainability strategy to concrete behaviour

Having a sustainability strategy on paper is not the same as embedding it throughout the organisation. In her role, Lisanne aims to bridge that gap. Not by sending messages, but by actively involving colleagues and initiating conversations about what they need to bring the strategy to life.

Employees expressed a need for explanation, context, and ownership. People are willing to contribute to sustainability if they understand how to do so, and why it matters to their work. Lisanne developed tailored sessions for various teams – sales, procurement, and customer support – to explore how their day-to-day tasks connect to sustainability goals. Not through abstract terminology, but by using relatable dilemmas and case studies. For example: "What do you do if a client asks for a natural material, but recycled plastic is the more sustainable option?" Such discussions not only raise awareness but also enable employees to become storytellers of the company's sustainability efforts.

Tailoring training to the audience

According to Lisanne, it is crucial to adapt both communication and training approaches to the audience. An online training might work well in one setting, but a personal session may be more effective elsewhere. For example, at Gispen (a brand within Ahrend), where Dutch is the primary language, in-person discussions may be more suitable. For production teams – who are less involved in strategic sessions – sustainability is integrated into broader company meetings, where leadership emphasises its importance. In the Czech Republic, where sustainability is less culturally embedded, Lisanne is currently exploring the most effective way to start the conversation.

Question by participant: How to engage production teams in sustainable manufacturing?

A participant asked how to involve production employees in sustainability when they often don't participate in e-learning or meetings. The following practical insights were shared:

- On-the-floor training is more effective than digital tools
- Time investment is a challenge, but essential. Management must explicitly allocate time
- Don't just tell, show. Integrate sustainability into daily routines so that it becomes the default
- Make success visible. Show the positive impact of sustainable actions
- Include the right people. When conducting analyses such as double materiality, involve not only management but also shop floor employees

Final thoughts

Meaningful stakeholder dialogue is all about understanding the other's perspective. This applies not just to external stakeholders, but just as much to your own colleagues. What does a specific group need to show sustainable behaviour? What does change mean in their daily work? Asking these questions creates space for change from within. Not imposed, but co-created.



Contact

For more information about the Community of Practice, contact Marlieke van den Tillaar (m.vanden.tillaar@ser.nl).

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