

Sustainability by Stealth



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A blog by David Pencheon caught my eye. It was called *Sustainability by Stealth – 8 steps to heaven*. The author is a public health doctor who was Director of the NHS Sustainable Development Unit and based his thoughts on a paper by Dror Etzion, Assistant Professor, McGill University (*Sustainability by Stealth: four ways to make sustainability more attractive*).

Both authors implicitly address a very important question: “How do we effectively communicate sustainability for lasting change?” The answers are not what we think. They should cause us to think carefully when trying to engage employees in an effort to reduce energy use in organisations.

David Pencheon takes the original four steps and expands them to eight. In my 30 years of designing and running employee engagement programmes, I can identify with all eight steps. This paper takes each of the eight steps and expands on them and provides real life examples to illustrate the principles.

The 8 steps are:

1. Engage people by listening, not by hectoring, haranguing, finger wagging and inducing guilt

We have all experienced what it is like to be at the receiving end of negativity. We simply switch off and will often do exactly the opposite of the advice we are being given because we dislike the attitude and approach of the messenger who has forgotten that it is easier to pull wet spaghetti than to push it. Meanwhile the audience has forgotten the message. All they remember is how bad they felt.

Listening implies genuine interest and partnership in resolving common issues. In his book, *To Understand Each Other*, Paul Tournier says:

We can never over-emphasise the immense need every individual has to be listened to, to be taken seriously and to be understood.



Also listening gives us useful information on further opportunities. For this reason any awareness/training seminars need to be largely **interactive**. People stay awake, they contribute, take ownership and find the process lively and enjoyable. They become more engaged. This may seem an obvious point but few people do it.

2. Be positive about the future

Climate change has been re-branded as the climate emergency. However, there is great danger in playing the 'doomsday' card to scare people by showing global impacts of climate change. If we read the science it can be very depressing especially when we look at rising global temperatures, increasing sea levels, deforestation, population growth and diversity losses predicted for the next 40 years.

Not only do we need to be positive about the future but keep it local and within conceptual grasp of daily life. For example, in 2013 the University of St. Andrews had a vision of becoming carbon neutral by 2016. It is a positive message and it was not far into the future. It is certainly more motivating than: "Cut emissions now or 50% of the world will die by 2050". Messages like these induce a paralysis. As Pencheon said: "Martin Luther King did not say: "I have a nightmare"". So we need to frame the future carefully with a positive vision of what is possible.

3. Avoid the long term

Long term planning is important but in communicating sustainability we need to bring things into the present and the near future. That is why the example from St. Andrews is inspiring. If the University said it wanted to be zero carbon by 2060, most people would say: "I won't be around. So we will pass that challenge to future generations. Good luck to me. Now where was I....."

4. Don't rely on reason

A reliance on reason and logic to induce behaviour change is dangerous because, as humans, our decisions and judgements are less based on our logic and values (as we would like to think) and more on emotions and wrong interpretations of data and reality.

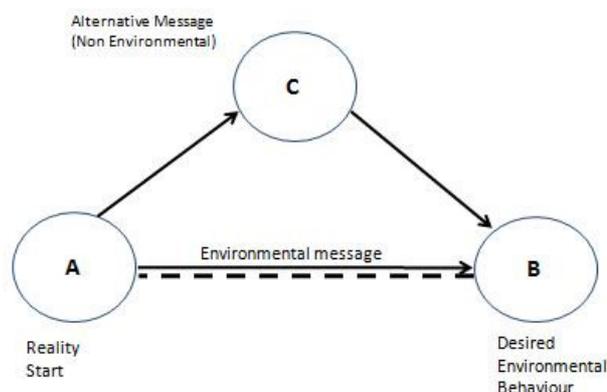
Nobel Prize Winner, Daniel Kahneman, addresses some of the reasons for this in his book *Thinking: Fast and Slow*. Many organisations have the view that "we don't do emotions at work". The problem is that they forget their employees are human beings. Many organisations treat their employees like machines and then are surprised to find they are difficult to engage.

A good example of tapping into emotions and goodwill is a food manufacturer who pledged to donate 20% of the savings from an energy saving campaign to a charity. The charity was chosen by the employees and the majority voted for a local hospice. So the employees were stakeholders in the process.

5. Apply the principle of Obliquity

Very often, challenging goals can be best achieved indirectly. The principle of indirection has been known for many years but popularised more recently by John Kay's book *Obliquity*. Examples abound when communicating on sustainability. Often we identify an opportunity and want people to take the specific action to be more sustainable. So we work backwards and frame an environmental message as a means of getting a change of environmental behaviour. A good example is encouraging hotel guests to reuse their towels if staying in the hotel more than one night. Conventional environmental messages achieved reuse rates of 40% in a study by Goldstein, Martin and Calдини in *Yes!: 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to be Persuasive*. But in a controlled experiment when they changed the message to: "Did you know the majority of guests in this hotel reuse their towels if staying for more than one night?" , the reuse rate is increased to 67%. I quoted this example at a

seminar recently and asked delegates why. One replied “Because we are sheep”. We have an innate feeling of wanting to be mainstream or normal. The important point is that an environmental message is often not the best means of achieving environmental behaviour change. Going from A to B via C can be faster and more effective. The oblique angle at C gives rise to the name of the principle.



6. Find out what motivates people at a personal level

It is good to find out what motivates people but often it is best not to use the word “motivate”. Words such as “like”, “prefer” and “enjoy” make people less self-conscious. Sometimes on a plane or train journey I ask people if they have read any good books or seen any films recently which made them think. It is interesting to see what comes back. Their motivations show themselves quite quickly.

One of the problems with most organisations is that they unintentionally demotivate employees. If you ask people to write down what they like about their organisation in which they work, the list is short relative to the list of dislikes. One way to get people motivated is to identify and reduce or remove factors which demotivate. When people are generally more motivated they are more likely to be more specifically motivated to engage on sustainability issues. The reverse is also true.

I was once called to hotel where the chef had made significant energy and water savings in the catering department. Gas consumption was down 41% and electricity down by 24% through increased staff awareness. The chef, Carlos, said the management were delighted by the cost reductions but said he was motivated by other factors. At this point Carlos had my full attention. “What factors?” I asked.



Carlos replied that since the training the gas wastage was cut so the kitchen was cooler. This meant tempers were less frayed with less plates flying. This meant better teamwork, less turnover, less recruiting and training costs and the quality of the food had increased. In short energy saving was good because it made his life easier. To cap it all Carlos had been asking for two new combi ovens for three years and because the sub-metering proved his savings were greater than other parts of the hotel, the management team made his ovens an investment priority and they had arrived the week before my visit. Each oven was more efficient and delivered 50% savings. "So it was win-win-win for everyone". This is also a good example of obliquity.

Sometimes saving energy has unintended consequences as in this example. The challenge is to identify some of these benefits before they happen.

7. Make sustainable choices easier

I was in a company recently which significantly reduced paper use. In the past people would click 'print' and go to a large printer in the corner of the office to collect their documents but often people forgot to do so. So the settings were changed on the copier so when an employee arrived at the copier they had to swipe their ID for the printing to start. Paper consumption reduced by 50% which begs the question: "Was all that printing in the past really necessary?"



A Local Authority in Scotland had diesel pool cars and had invested in 20 new electric vehicles and were wondering how they could persuade employees to use the new electric cars in preference to the diesel option. To their surprise they did not need to persuade the staff who did it anyway. When they enquired why, they discovered the electric cars were more spacious and had better acceleration than the diesel. Unwittingly they made the more sustainable option easier.



Here is an example of how not to do it:



Photo courtesy of Warrington Cycle Campaign's 'Facility of the month'.

Cyclists are asked to dismount 7 times in a cycle lane in a 200 metre stretch.

8. Make it fun

Making it fun rather than painful helps the behaviour to become a norm. In a chain of 5 star hotels in London, environmental performance is measured and the best performing hotels are given special recognition and reward. The staff enjoy the competition and feel appreciated for their efforts. There is a social dimension which the staff find engaging.

Conclusion

Human behaviour is complex, irrational and often unpredictable. This should make us ask if the way we think we are communicating is actually effective. These eight steps might not bring total success but will certainly help us avoid errors which can blunt our effectiveness.