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Leading Environmental Change: A Sustainable Human Resource Management Approach

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Introduction

In this paper, Andrew Bratton introduces the concept of sustainable human resource management (HRM). He then reflects on the role of environmental leadership, employee voice and organisational culture in supporting environmental sustainability, and how this is closely connected to organisational change. Markus Hiemann then presents a case study example of the role of leadership and organisational culture in supporting the implementation of environmental sustainability initiatives in a conference centre within the NHS Scotland.

What is sustainable HRM?

As the United Kingdom hosts the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland later this year, we can expect academic and practitioner interest in organisational environmental sustainability to become even more widespread. In this context, HRM scholars advocate a pro-active role for HRM.[1] Emerging definitions of sustainability are shifting towards 'just sustainability' (the nexus between social justice and environmentalism), a broader approach that prioritises social justice but does not downplay the limits of supporting ecosystems.[2] Drawing on the work of Ehnert et al. (2016), Bratton and Paulet (forthcoming, 2022) define sustainable HRM as:

> *"The adoption of HRM strategies, practices, leadership behaviours and the alignment of technologies which enable the achievement of organizational, social, individual and environment goals; with an impact inside and outside of the organization for all present*

[1] For further reading on sustainble HRM, see Stankevičiūtė, Ž., & Savanevičienė, A. (2018). Designing sustainable HRM: The core characteristics of emerging field. *Sustainability, 10*(12), 4798. https://doi.org/10.3390/su10124798

[2] For further reading on social justice and ecological limits concepts, see Agyeman, J., Bullard, R. D., & Evans, B. (Eds.). (2003). *Just sustainabilities: Development in an unequal world*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

and future human beings in an equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems."

This definition incorporates four key features of sustainable HRM. First, it adopts a multi-stakeholder approach to environmental sustainability. Attention is given to the role of leadership and stakeholders engagement in minimising the negative impacts of organisations, such as carbon emissions, on the natural environment and on citizens and communities. The HR function is seen to play a key role in aligning HRM practices with sustainability goals and providing influence and advice to support people-led sustainability change. This highlights the broader strategic position of the HR function and acknowledges the critical importance of joint accountability with senior stakeholders and specialist service functions (e.g., estate/facilities management) in setting the sustainability agenda, accountabilities and associated targets. Second, sustainable HRM must be viable for the organisation and its workers. At the same time, it is married to notions of social justice (Muller-Camen and Camen, 2018) and ecological limits. Third, focus is given to the alignment of technologies with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, SDG 13 "climate action" by encouraging investment in low-carbon technologies which can mitigate climate change. Fourth, recognition is given to inevitable tensions between HRM practices and goals for sustainability at organisational level (Guerci and Carollo, 2016).

What is environmental sustainability in organisations?

Environmental sustainability reflects multiple stakeholder calls for action to reduce workplace emissions, and to add low carbon jobs and duties to existing HR processes (Renwick, Jabbour, Muller-Camen, Redman, and Wilkinson, 2016). Considering the focus of many environmental initiatives on changing aspects of work routines, HR specialists may be useful sources of information and influence to support this process. In the workplace, this includes encouraging energy efficiency, waste reduction and recycling, water conservation, and employees' use of alternative low-carbon forms of transportation (e.g., a bus, train or bicycle). At the individual level, *workplace pro-environmental behaviour* (WPEB) can be defined as 'a systematic set of actions from a collective network of organisational actors spread across a company, team, and/or value chain' (Kennedy, Whiteman, and Williams, 2015, p. 370). Although employees' pro-environmental behaviours are critical to the effectiveness of environmental sustainability initiatives, there is insufficient understanding of the role of leadership to support these behaviours (Afsar, Shahjehan and Shah, 2018).

What is the role of leaders in creating environmentally sustainable organisations?

Sustainable HRM and leadership research has elevated the importance of followership and employee voice for encouraging strategic change and pro-environmental behaviours. Environmental leadership in this context has been described as a process to create a shared vision of the organisation's sustainability goals and provide followers with the necessary resources to achieve their goals and to foster green work engagement (Bratton, 2020; Çop, Olorunsola, & Alola, 2021). A 'sustainability leader' can extend beyond senior managers and include HR managers, environmental managers, line managers, union representatives and employees. Robertson and Barling (2015, p. 169) found that pro-environmental leaders are more likely to (1) possess personal values that go beyond self-interest, (2) have favourable attitudes toward the natural environment, (3) perceive social pressure to support environmental and sustainability initiatives, and (4) view environmental issues as commercial opportunities for their organisation. These behaviours include encouraging eco-innovation among employees, encouraging the acquisition of new knowledge, sharing of information and ideas related to environmental issues.

What role does culture play in supporting workplace pro-environmental behaviour?

Organisational sustainability is associated with specific pro-environmental attitudes, values and behaviours and a culture of learning for sustainability. In this context, organisational behaviour theorists have tried to identify effective ways to change manifestations of organisational culture: visible artefacts, including language and shared behaviour; work values, which are invisible, but can be espoused; and various sets of HRM practices and employee voice mechanisms that reinforce a culture of learning for sustainability (Bratton, 2018). Research shows that the three main strategies of planned culture change are:

- Leadership processes that create the motivation to change behaviour, with a particular emphasis on their symbolic content
- Reframing social networks of symbols and meanings through artefacts, language, rituals and ceremonies
- Initiating new HRM practices to change work conduct.

All three strategies resonate with Lewin's (1951) classic approach to managing change, represented as a three-step change process of unfreezing- change- refreezing. It is based on the

premise that to change from a current position to a future position, there is a need to loosen or 'unfreeze' what currently exists, undertake the identified change, and reconstitute the changes by institutionalising them or "refreezing" (Rosenbaum et.al. 2017, p. 299). The 'change' phase includes a range of interrelated processes geared towards structural, attitudinal and behaviour change - including action research, group dynamics, and force field analysis.

Figure 1. A process model for culture change (Source: Bratton, 2020, p. 370)

In this paper, we emphasise the iterative and dynamic nature of these change processes, in order to provide a counterpoint to the narrow depictions of Lewin's original work as a simple linear process, noted in Rosenbaum and colleagues' critique of Lewin's work (e.g., see also Desmond and Wilson, 2019). In doing so, we build on current thinking about leadership and culture change to depict planned organisational change as a set of broad, interactive phases, which operate in the context of contested employment relationships, and an understanding that workplace actions and their consequences are socially embedded. Steps 1 and 2 broadly

represent Lewin's 'unfreezing' stage, steps 3 and 4 represent the 'changing' stage, and step 5 represents the 'refreezing', or consolidation process. Our approach emphasises the importance of communicating a clear change vision to all stakeholders affected by change (Kotter, 2012), including the use of direct and representative employee voice mechanisms for shaping and enacting this vision (e.g., see Markey et al., 2019).

It is important to note that Lewin recognised the need for countervailing forces of change at individual, group and organisational levels, in order to *recognise movement* where needed – 'refreezing' is thus not simply viewed as a permanent 'state' within organisations. From this perspective, we return to our definition of sustainable HRM (and pro-environmental change), which treats culture change as a continuous, open-ended and unpredictable process – and adopts a pragmatic lens that points to useful leadership and people management 'levers' for such change, grounded in Lewin's organising schema. Leadership is thus treated as a form of relational or conversational practice, designed to expand collective capacity and individual leader development across all levels within organisations (not restricted to line manager roles). This view of leadership is exemplified in interventions that are used to legitimise, and/or learn from the variety of perspectives and subcultures within organisations (e.g., Bushe, and Marshak, 2009; Francis and Thomson, 2019).

What are the implications for future leadership and management practice?

This paper introduced the concept of sustainable HRM and reflected on the role of leadership and organisational culture in supporting environmental sustainability in organisations. The following case study explores the role of leadership and organisational culture in supporting the implementation of environmental sustainability initiatives in a conference centre within the NHS Scotland.

Case study: Environmental leadership at NHS National Services Scotland

Background and context

This case study involves a conference centre within the NHS Scotland. The conference centre is part of the National Services Scotland (NSS), a non-departmental public body with an annual budget of roughly £797million (2019/20) and a workforce of approximately 2,700 people

(2020/21) across Scotland. Its purpose is to provide national solutions to improve the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland. This includes supporting sustainability strategy development and implementation across the rest of the NHS Scotland. This supporting role means that the organisation works closely with NHS Health Boards in the delivery of both healthcare and business support services. The conference centre employs approximately 25 people with about 40 per cent of workers unionised. The conference centre's sustainability initiatives are reportedly driven by both business benefits and ethical principles. First, lower carbon consumption reduces operating costs. Second, public sector clients, and corporate clients are increasingly using sustainability criteria in making decisions when purchasing event packages. For example, the Scottish Government has made particular efforts to promote sustainability with the publication of a Sustainable Procurement Duty within the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014[3], and because public sector clients are the primary patrons of the Centre, the management team felt that it was in a position to align their services with Scottish Government's value statements. The centre's sustainability activities were seen to support organisational sustainability strategy and promote corporate branding with environmental communications and green marketing.

The role of leadership and culture in pro-environmental change

Creating an environmentally sustainable organisation involves changing employees' behaviours. A sustainable HRM approach adopts multi-stakeholder perspective and attention is given to the role of leadership and stakeholder engagement in environmental sustainability. The HR function plays a strategic role in aligning HRM practices with sustainability goals and providing influence and advice to specialist service functions. In the planned culture change model outlined above, this relates to steps 3 and 4 that represent the 'changing' stage. Explaining the importance of creating a coalition to empower action and facilitate learning opportunities for employees to help support environmental change, the manager put it like this:

> *<u>The best thing to do is engage people right from the beginning</u>… There is a huge risk of you not getting the buy-in… <u>This is why it is good to set a Green Team</u>… It is the opportunity to have representatives of the department to speak up and tell*

[3] For more information on the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 visit: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2014/12/section/9

> *what their concerns are to ensure that whatever measures we are trying to implement are implemented effectively*. (Conference Coordinator & Environmental, Equality and Diversity Lead)

This is significant as this interviewee emphasises the role of employee voice mechanisms to support a culture of learning for sustainability. Organisational culture can shape employees' behaviour by ensuring that organisational leaders have '*the buy-in of people [employees]'*. It demonstrates how leaders can use 'green teams' to influence green work engagement and encourage employee environmental leadership. In that sense, according to this interviewee, organisational culture within the conference centre aims to increase workers' commitment to environmental goals. Moreover, it highlights the appointment of environmental 'champions' and 'green teams' to support individual and group learning and to encourage others to change. The centre's 'sustainability committee' or green group, a cross-functional employee committee chaired by the Head of the conference centre, coordinates sustainability activities and initiatives.

Senior managers attempted to encourage green work engagement and promote employee environmental leadership by developing meaningful ways to communicate pro-environmental values and the need for engagement. In the planned culture change model, this relates to step 5 the 'refreezing' or consolidation process. Interviewees recognised that they have target-driven cultures, so many of their employees responded well to values embedded in local level goals. The sustainability manager explained it like this:

> *Creating that culture change is having the information, <u>having the data to back promotional campaigns to back energy efficiency, to back resource and recycling</u>. If you don't have the figures, be it from an emission, total tons or from a cost point of view to say look, "<u>if we don't do this that means we can't hire … 3 head counts for this job, or that program, or that project, or save this much money</u>" … It is having those systems and having the robustness of electricity, gas, water, and waste as a minimum to feed your campaign.* (Sustainability Manager)

Efficiency savings appeared to be readily incorporated into the organisational culture. This served to make corporate sustainability targets appear more relevant for employees by framing

them within a local context. From a union perspective, a portion of any efficiency savings could be used to invest in employee well-being initiatives or protect jobs and pay workers. The appointment of union environmental representatives was effective for consulting with employees and encouraging creative ideas. Following the Scottish Government's guidelines on partnership working in the NHS, shop stewards participated on the sustainability committee and had facilitated employee feedback on key strategic sustainability policy documents, for example. It suggests that representative forms of participation are also associated with the success of environmental activities, especially in unionised public sector organisations. The following section investigates the applied recommendations from this study.

Practical implications and stakeholder actions

The analysis in this paper has implications for our understanding of leadership and organisational culture in supporting environmental sustainability and results in some practical questions to consider. How do you develop a business case for sustainability? How does organisational culture influence environmental sustainability in the workplace? How effective are managers in their role as facilitators of environmental sustainability change? These represent important questions to consider when analysing the contribution of leaders in creating environmentally sustainable organisation.

Developing the business case for sustainability

The first recommendation is for organisations to create a sustainability business case. Research demonstrates that embedding sustainability efforts clearly result in a positive influence on business performance. Sustainability benefits organisations by supporting an overall risk management strategy by at minimum reducing the harm to people or the plant and at best creating value for stakeholders. A sophisticated sustainability strategy should focus on improving environmental, social and governance (ESG) performance in the areas in which the organisation has a material environmental or social impact (e.g., operations, supply chain, or customers). To measure the business impact of organisations, sustainability leaders are encouraged to use the SDG Action Manager, a free confidential online tool used to measure and manage their social and environmental impact.

Fostering a culture of learning for sustainability

The second recommendation is for organisations to develop a pro-environmental organisational culture by recruiting new employees and senior managers into the organisation who value environmental sustainability, and by providing learning and development opportunities for HR practitioners and other employees to increase environmental awareness, knowledge, and skills utilisation. For example, interventions could include training on environmental responsibilities and how to successfully champion and communicate environmental ideas.

Employee voice in learning for sustainability

The third recommendation is for employers and workers to engage in more substantive forms of employee 'voice' or participation in environmental sustainability issues. Early involvement with employees and union representatives to help in the design and implementation of any environmental sustainability initiative can be an effective means of managing organisational changes, especially in unionised public sector organisations. Creating an environmentally sustainable organisation is a discursive undertaking and fostering creativity and dialogue about sustainability and investing in resources (e.g., time) for unions, employees and employers to work together could help embed environmental values and behaviours. It also helps to maximise the benefits of shared knowledge and distributive leadership.

Summary

This case study highlights the critical importance of leadership and organisational culture in fostering a culture of learning for sustainability. Focus has been given to the potential for employee involvement and "voice" mechanisms in the building of a culture of learning for sustainability, and employees' engagement in pro-environmental behaviour. For example, the appointment of environmental 'champions' and 'green teams' enabled individual and group learning opportunities in support of the change process. Additionally, the case study suggests that representative forms of participation are also associated with the success of environmental activities, especially in unionised public sector organisations. The key positive lesson to be learned is that leadership, effective employee voice and fostering a culture of learning for sustainability contributes to organisational sustainability.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of sustainable HRM and reflect on the role of leadership and organisational culture in supporting environmental sustainability in organisations. Indeed, the influential Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) considers sustainable HRM central to promoting pro-environmental behaviours that will act to decarbonise the workplace (Houghton, 2019). Research consistently points to the need to examine the personal values held by leaders toward the environment (an element of organisational culture). The National Services Scotland case study illustrates that leadership, employee voice and organisational culture were critical success factors for changing employees' behaviour and improving environmental outcomes. Finally, the case demonstrates that individual and collective employment relationships contribute positively to organisational sustainability.

Reflective learning activity for practitioners

1. Identify the learning points from reading this reflective paper.
2. How might you apply this learning to future academic work or practice?

Reflective learning activity for students

Task:

1. Complete an online search for sustainable or green workplaces. What, in your view, are the key characteristics of an environmentally sustainable organisation? Think about how leadership and culture influence environmental sustainability in the workplace.
2. How do leaders support a green or sustainability-oriented culture?
3. Does everybody benefit from the outcomes of environmental sustainability?

Andrew Bratton

Dr Andrew Bratton is a Lecturer in Human Resource Management at Edinburgh Napier University. He has over 10 years' academic and practitioner experience as a business school researcher and lecturer in the UK and Singapore, and previously as a change manager in a Microsoft business technology consultancy. His research and knowledge exchange work are focused on sustainable human resource management, leadership, workplace innovation, technology and action learning. He has published work on Sustainable HRM in *The Psychology of Green Organizations* (Oxford University Press) and *Human Resource Management: A Critical Approach* (Holtzbrink).

Markus Hiemann

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