



10 Things New Sustainability Managers Need to Know

If you've been asked to lead your company's sustainability efforts, it may seem overwhelming. What do you need to know? How can you make sense of all the available information?

We have consolidated a few key questions into the following list, along with links to resources that can help—whether you're looking for “Sustainability 101” or the most cutting-edge global research.

1 Do sustainability investments pay back?

Yes, according to [30 years of research](#). Return on corporate social responsibility investments may show up in financial metrics (e.g. [share price](#)), operational metrics (e.g. [cost savings](#)) or strategic metrics (e.g. [customer loyalty](#)). But you need to make the right investments for your company. For instance, [philanthropy](#) and environmental certification by third parties can [boost your share price](#). And building bridges with stakeholders can help [prolong good performance and rebound from shocks](#).

2 How can we make sustainability part of our corporate culture?

Take a step back and view your practices as part of a **portfolio** (p19). Start by identifying what you're already doing against the **four quadrants of core practices** and which are the potential catalysts for change. Implement formal and informal practices that help you deliver on existing commitments and innovate. For instance, get your supervisors to **behave** in a way that spreads sustainability. Understand how organizational factors – like **unionization, leadership and communication** – can help or hinder your cause. Or read what companies like **Tembec, Suncor, Teck and Canadian Pacific** have done to build sustainability into their cultures (p13 to 16).

3 How can our supply chain be more competitive and sustainable?

A **three-step roadmap** (p16) can help identify your motivators, assess your levers and improve your practices. Your **customers, costs, compliance, competitive advantage and conscience** (p8) can all drive change in the supply chain. Use a set of internal (such as incentives) and external (such as industry collaboration) **levers** (p9) to enable change. A **framework** (p10 to 11) can help you move from baseline to best practices. Insulate your supply chain against shocks by building with your suppliers. In addition to building better relationships, consider new ways to find revenues or cut costs: for instance, **reverse supply chains** or **shared-savings contracts** with suppliers.

4 Will our customers pay for sustainable products or services?

Yes, depending on a range of product, consumer, company and contextual **factors**. Consumers want to know their dollars **will make a difference**. And they expect your CSR efforts to **make sense** in the context of your company. Management research suggests consumers generally want **product features** satisfied before sustainability ones. Psychology research is contributing exciting new work, unpacking the individual and social drivers for “green” choices. Researchers have found, for instance, that consumers might **pay more for less** in order to be seen as altruistic and gain status. And just as consumers might pay more, they'll also **punish** if your behaviour fails to meet expectations.

5 How can I best engage stakeholders?

Start by identifying your key stakeholder groups, then develop an **engagement strategy** – do you want a transactional relationship (giving back), a transitional relationship (building bridges) or a transformational relationship (changing society)? Understand what each of these looks like **in your sector** (p13), be it government, non-profit or corporate. Identify which **principles** you can leverage to build successful relationships with stakeholders. Beyond building the **trust** that enables firms to operate more easily in their environment, managing for stakeholders can pay off in the long-term by developing into a **unique resource** that improves your ability to innovate, respond quickly and anticipate demand.

6 What are the best measurements of my company's environmental impacts?

There are numerous tools available for measuring – and valuing – impacts. Among the most common are Life Cycle Analysis, Environmental Footprint, Ecosystem Services Valuation and Environmental Input-Output Modeling. Decide **which tool** to use based on your unique needs and goals. Several **emerging tools** may also be of interest.

7 How can our corporate sustainability practices attract and retain great employees?

Make sure employees – and prospective employees – are, in fact, aware of your **CSR initiatives**. Show existing employees how what they do helps the environment to **improve performance and beat burnout**. Employees who feel they're part of your CSR, by giving to employee support programs, for instance, feel **more committed** and may be less likely to leave your company.

8 How can my company mitigate and adapt to climate change?

Identify the key risks and opportunities in **your sector**. Connect with peers through your industry association, or a multi-stakeholder group. In the interim, **start** by undertaking steps such as incorporating climate into strategic planning and developing mitigation and adaptation programs. Ensure you're equipped to measure and disclose your emissions – leading initiatives like the **Greenhouse Gas Protocol** and the **Carbon Disclosure Project** have gained significant traction with business and investors. Consider using standardized metrics such as **carbon intensity**, **carbon dependency**, **carbon exposure** and **carbon risk** that allow for comparisons over time.

9 What is business sustainability?

Ask five people and you'll likely get five definitions. We like to go beyond the triple-bottom line definition to think of business sustainability as organizational **resilience**; the ability to bounce back from shocks because firms are connected to the economic, environmental and social systems in which they operate. Why be sustainable? Firms leading in the area of sustainability can also **perform well financially**, **manage risk** and **keep employees satisfied**.

10 How can I find resources on other questions, or find out about new research or research in progress on other issues?

Search NBS's **knowledge centre** to find resources by type, year of publication, topic or discipline. Consult the **member directory** to find NBS members by organization. Share resources, find events or ask questions of researchers on our **member forum**. Finally, if you have a question or comment, please feel free to contact the NBS team (info@nbs.net).

Many of these questions reflect **knowledge priorities** identified by NBS' council of industry leaders. Please let us know which questions are on your "Top 10" list.