

Care and Feeding of Your Green Team

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One way that a growing number of companies are starting off on their path to increased sustainability is the establishment of a green team – an internal group, most commonly of volunteers, ideally from different key functions, to identify, advocate for, and implement certain green initiatives. Green teams have been around for some time, and the perception may be that they have become commonplace. Actually, for a lot of businesses, both green teams and larger, more comprehensive sustainability programs are still emerging.

The upside of green teams is that they can be a good first step in a sustainability program. They can also help increase innovation, motivation, communication, and excitement around sustainability, and done extremely well, they can even be the organizing force behind significant sustainability actions throughout the company. There are companies that have made significant sustainability progress over many years, despite having no full-time employees with sustainability in their title, and ‘just’ a green team. The downside is that if green teams are not established with the right foundation, goals, management support, and balance of autonomy and inter-connection with the organization, they can end up being nothing more than an ineffective feel-good activity, or worse, a contributor to de-motivation of the team itself and possibly the organization, as well as to a consensus that ‘sustainability doesn’t work.’ Further, if the organization doesn’t link the team’s goals to those of the company, determine how to build off of the green team foundation to get to the next level of sustainability organization-wide, or empower the green team to help lead that transition, the sustainability effort may be mis-directed or become stagnant.

Therefore, for a green team to be successful, it must be cultivated, much like plants in a garden. Here, then, are some key recommendations for successfully cultivating a green team should you choose that option as part of your sustainability program. . .

Give it just enough food and water: Too little or too much food (nutrients) and water will either stunt growth or kill your plants. Similarly, a green team needs enough resources to be effective for the scope of their responsibilities and expectations. For most green teams, this doesn’t mean a huge commitment of resources. Often, green teams are essentially pilot programs, which use the savings from early projects to help fund the next projects, and so on. So the resource commitment might or might not include a small startup budget, but at a minimum it should include allowing team members to allocate a reasonable agreed-upon amount of their work time to the green team activity. Too many green teams are formed without even an acknowledgement that what they are doing is important enough to spend appropriate business time on it, so they end up getting relegated to before-hours, after-hours, or hurried lunch discussions. As the team’s goals, actions, and expectations expand, and as success is demonstrated, resources can increase appropriately. But don’t try to expand the scope or expectations of the team faster than the resources or existing structure will support.

Know what you want to grow: You don’t plant tomatoes if you want to grow pumpkins. With green teams, invest the small amount of time up front to set expectations so that everyone knows the team’s agreed-upon mission, scope and responsibilities. Giving a small green team too much to take on can set it up for failure. Also, know what you want your green team to lead to – either continued green team leadership of bigger and more comprehensive sustainability efforts, or a transition to a more formalized sustainability program.

Include variety: In an ornamental or vegetable garden, variety makes things more interesting and/or more nutritionally valuable. The most successful green teams have a representative from as many of the key functional areas of the business as is feasible, and each of those people is responsible to be the liaison between the green team and the department. Yes, it’s also most effective when each of the green team members is enthusiastic about exploring sustainability options, but if your green team is simply made up of the

half-dozen people who are the ‘greenest’ in your organization, you run the risk of it becoming just a feel-good activity that doesn’t take into account the opportunities, challenges, and needs of the overall organization.

Don’t neglect it: Ignore those tomatoes or houseplants for too long and you have dead plants. Similarly, your green team shouldn’t be shoved off in a corner and forgotten about. If it’s important enough to spend time on (and it is), it’s important enough to have periodic status updates to keep abreast of progress and challenges.

But don’t over-prune it: Cutting back a plant too aggressively can stunt or kill it. Similarly, with a green team, while you want to give it attention, you also want to give it room to operate, and some freedom, autonomy, and authority appropriate to the agreed-upon goals. The innovation of the team will be improved if it is clear that they have the autonomy and freedom to develop and recommend for management approval well-supported ideas to enhance the company’s sustainability within agreed-upon criteria.

Give it enough light: Just like plants, green teams need the light of day to survive and thrive. This means the right amount of visibility and exposure – both within the overall organization and in particular with management. Making the green team, its goals and activities, and in particular, its successes, visible to the rest of the organization increases the buy-in of the organization, the commitment of the green team, and the likelihood of success. Just as critical is visibility and exposure of the green team to upper management. This demonstrates the company’s commitment to the effort, establishes accountability and helps drive results, and helps embed the actions undertaken into the organization.

Sometimes outside resources help: Many a gardener has turned to outside expertise on garden design or plant care to address areas in which they didn’t have the expertise. Similarly, when a green-team approach is used, there will be enthusiasm and passion, and there may even be a fair amount of basic sustainability knowledge, but at times a deeper or more specific level of sustainability knowledge or experience is needed. Outside resources, such as consultants in sustainability planning, implementation, measurement, and/or reporting, or in specific areas being targeted by the team, can be a good way to bring in some of that needed knowledge. And the best consultants will ‘teach the organization to fish’ rather than ‘handing you a fish’ – they’ll help you embed the new knowledge in the organization.

Recognize it’s an ongoing process: Anyone who’s ever tended a garden knows that you’re never ‘done’ – there are discreet tasks and projects, but overall, it’s a process of continuous improvement. It’s the same way with a sustainability effort and a green team. There will be milestones, tasks, and projects, but be sure to keep in mind that the ultimate goal is a continued increase in organizational sustainability, similar to a company quality program.

Enjoy it: As with gardening, sometimes it’s fun, sometimes it feels like hard work from which you don’t seem to be making much progress, and sometimes there are setbacks, but if you keep the overall perspective of enjoying the process, you’ll have more success. The more you can support your green team in creating an enthusiastic, engaged culture throughout the organization around increased sustainability – and most employees really do get engaged and motivated by sustainability efforts, benefitting their overall productivity in their core activities as well –the more successful your program will be.

Done well, a green team can be a strong step in the development of a more comprehensive, integrated sustainability program within an organization. If you keep these tips in mind you will significantly increase the likelihood that your green team will thrive and bring a great deal of benefit to your organization

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