

## Harnessing the power of employees to address Climate Change – How to successfully build and run a **Corporate Green Team**

Sustainable and climate aligned companies are more successful. Over 6 times more successful, as the Start - Up "right. based on science" has recently shown.<sup>1</sup> With up to 12% higher margins, as the Boston Consulting Group already revealed in 2017.<sup>2</sup> On top of these findings, higher costs will be imposed by governments on destroying the planet within the coming years, while at the same time low impact solutions are reaching mass market standards across almost all industries. Sustainability is increasingly becoming the decisive factor which will set companies apart from their competition.

At the same time, HR consultancies such as Gallup and ADP regularly find that only 15% of employees are really emotionally connected to their work. They lack a sense of purpose and "meaning", "they are just coming to work".<sup>3</sup> In a similar finding, 86% of all respondents worldwide have recently signed up to the sentence "I want the world to become more sustainable and equitable than before COVID" in a study commissioned by the World Economic Forum.<sup>4</sup>

Connecting these dots, the conclusion derived from these data is simple: We can make businesses more successful by involving our employees who want to protect and regenerate the planet in their jobs. If there ever was a true WIN - WIN - WIN constellation, this is it.

But how do we make this Win-Win-Win situation a reality in our companies?

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.right-basedonscience.de/reports/capturing-the-climate-factor-2020/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://media-publications.bcg.com/BCG-Total-Societal-Impact-Oct-2017.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.adpri.org/assets/the-global-study-of-engagement/> and here:

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238079/state-global-workplace-2017.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-09/global-yearning-for-change-after-the-covid-19-crisis-2020-09-ipsos.pdf>



Just establishing an employee group for sustainability will not do the trick

An increasing number of companies has recently seen corporate “Green Groups”, or employee groups for sustainability and climate action come into existence. They are called “Green Pioneers”, “Climate Champions”, “Sustainability Committees”, “Employees for Future”, “Sustainability Employee Resource Groups”, or simply “Green Teams”. Their task is simple: to push and pull their companies to become more sustainable, and more ambitious with regard to climate change.

In an ideal world, their role is that of a "change agent" or a "change angel". They act as transformation facilitators, as impulse givers to the line functions. They create the space, the energy, the motivation, they ask questions and constantly keep the system moving. So change happens from the inside out.

But what is their real role and impact? How can they be supported in a way that they don't end up sidelined by management and colleagues, frustrated with only looking after recycled printing paper or a reduction in plastic bottles, while the core business remains largely untouched? What are the success factors that determine whether an Employee Green Group can generate true and lasting change in the aspired direction?

## Success Factors for Company Green Groups

With our Non-For-Profit consultancy **planetgroups**, we facilitate and support employee driven initiatives for sustainability by using classic change management methods: We create structures, spaces and processes, we open up new perspectives, ideas and inspiration, we organize regular exchanges and meetings - also with planetgroups from other companies - and we ensure a constant influx of momentum and energy through praise, recognition and positive emotional experiences in the process.

Both from our own experiences, and from research and interviews we conducted before starting our NGO, we have identified the following nine success factors for the work of employee driven Green Groups, which we try to adhere to in the work with our planetgroups as well.

### **1) Address sustainability as a management responsibility – Employee Groups are there to help**

Far too often Green Teams are expected to come up with suggestions on how their companies can become more sustainable, and then to carry out these proposals and projects as a next step. But they are ill equipped for that, both in terms of resources, expertise, and decision making power. Most of the time the employees within the Green Groups hold none of the relevant roles in the hierarchy, they have no subject matter background in sustainability, and they are asked to do most of their climate engagement on top of their daily workload. That is not really fair, and it is also not likely to succeed.

So our advice to employee driven climate groups is to interpret their role differently. Sustainability is a management task. They are only there to help. So they should not strive to provide the answers – only to ask questions. They shouldn't do the work – they should just offer their support to those who are in charge. They should be the ideators and motivators for change, but not the executors. And if they need more expertise – they should ask the experts in the hierarchy. And if those don't know either, they can then invite external consultants or benchmark companies to upskill and inspire them both.

## **2) Focus on the Core**

Most of the time sustainability is still regarded as a strategy to protect, repair or fix what the main business has destroyed. But this approach can by definition never be sustainable. The core business has to stop destroying the planet in the first place - then no repairing and fixing will be needed afterwards. We don't need to do anything "on top" to become sustainable; we have to change the way we do what we do at the core. So while operations are important, sustainability groups must focus on the business case as such, holistically and comprehensively.

Our recommendation therefore is to include all three Scopes 1 - 3 of the emissions protocols in the Green Group efforts. This approach then takes into account also the climate impact of the products bought and sold, including their emissions in use and after use, and including business travel, logistics, employee commute, and equipment used in manufacturing. And we go even further with our NGO, we ask "our companies" to also involve their "non - material" footprint, which we call Scope 0 emissions. Here we look at the non-tangible impact of the company on the climate system, i.e. through advertising, financing, interaction with politics, local social projects, memberships, cooperation in industry associations and trade unions, and last but not least through the effect of their products in use, their consulting services, their press work or media content on the climate system.

Our goal is that businesses make a real and comprehensive value contribution to a better world. Every product sold and every service delivered must help to make the world a better and healthier place. Which will then, see above, make the companies more successful in their business, give their employees more fulfillment and purpose at work, and which will help all of us to protect our planet.

## **3) Focus on the business – and the business case**

Companies are systems with a common goal, and the principal goal of any organization is always to ensure its viability: in a company, that is to earn enough money, ideally with a margin, to pay off all the costs.

People don't go to work to meet their friends or to pursue a political agenda – they go there because they are paid to do so, and to deliver a specific performance in return. While social interaction, meaning, impact, recognition and the chance for personal development always play an important role at work, the fundamental

exchange relation of ensuring the viability of the overall organization together sits on top of everything.

Employee Green Groups therefore have to argue for everything they do within this framework. Not because their bosses don't care about the planet, too – they usually do. But because they have to justify whatever they do with the core reason why their system even exists: to produce and sell products and services which their customers want to buy, because they add value.

Now the very nice thing about sustainability is its imminent business case, as we have seen above. In the earlier days it was still possible to ruin the environment in one place in order to make money in another place, and to get away with it. These days are over. Customers demand sustainability, communities demand it, politics demand it, investors demand it, and employees demand it, too. Sustainability is the high road to keep sales and margins up, stability high, and to bring costs down. Green groups should follow this business reasoning to justify their requests, if they want to go far with them.

Sometimes this business case is not easy to make. It may require a longer term investment. It may incur higher costs at first. It will probably ask everybody to go through time consuming change processes. It may even mean to let go of profitable services, like flying to long-distance tourist destinations, or at least to change these offerings to make them as sustainable as possible. But in the medium to longer term it will always pay off. The better Green Groups stay focused on this business “WIN – WIN” frame of argument, the higher their chance that they will get what they want.

#### **4) Tell an inspiring story**

People don't like to be reminded of the climate crisis. The four main reasons for climate inaction, according to the Norwegian psychologist Per Espen Stoknes, are “doom, distance, dissonance and iDentity.”<sup>5</sup> The story about the destruction of our planet simply does not fit in well with all the other stories we are telling us about what matters in our lives. That's no different at our workplace.

If we want our colleagues and managers to act, we therefore have to tell them an inspiring story which they can positively relate to. Building a better world is such a

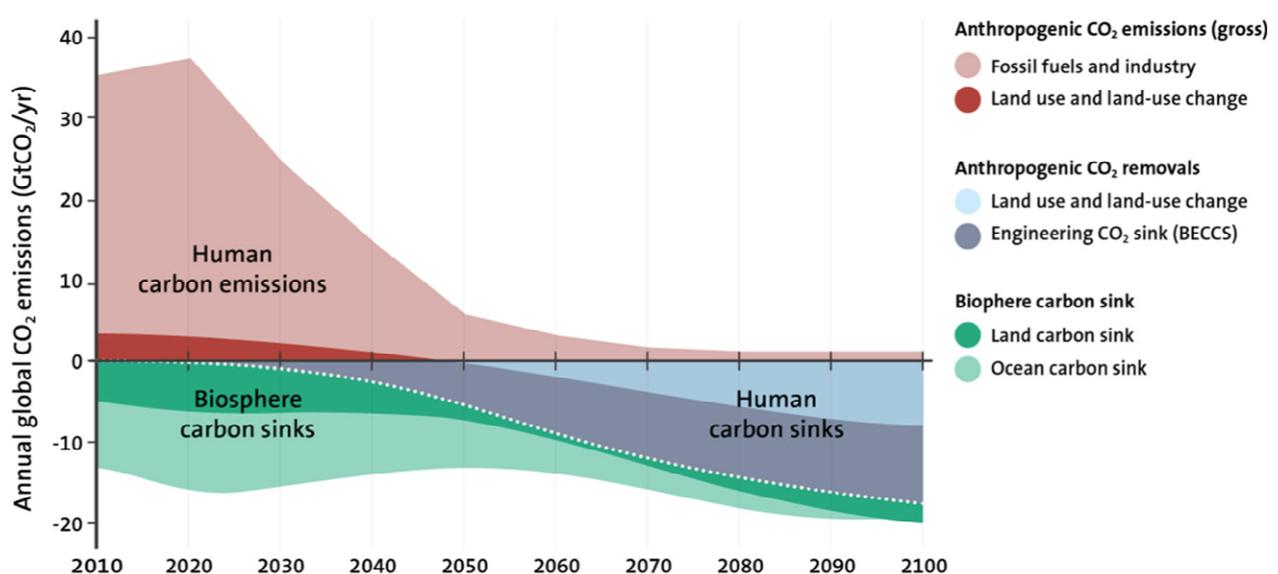
---

<sup>5</sup> [https://e360.yale.edu/features/how\\_can\\_we\\_make\\_people\\_care\\_about\\_climate\\_change](https://e360.yale.edu/features/how_can_we_make_people_care_about_climate_change)

story. Creating true customer-centric value for our clients is another. Protecting and improving lives in our communities also is. Bringing ground-breaking innovations to the world can make us enthusiastic and engaged. Even making a lot of money and outcompeting our business rivals has a strong potential to inspire us. We have to make the case that whatever we want to achieve, it will bring tangible progress to our world and to our companies right now, that it will create something we desire, something we enjoy here, rather than avoiding something horrible which would otherwise happen sometime in the future.

## 5) Be brave and demanding

Let's face it, reaching net-zero by 2050 is neither an ambitious target, nor inspiring, nor in any way sufficient to save the planet and our species. If you read the latest summary on the state of the planet, put together by the greatest scientists worldwide at the moment, it becomes clear that we have to start with a complete redesign of our economies *now*, turning them at unprecedented speed into a regenerative, planet positive business model: "To reduce the effects of climate change, it will not be sufficient to remove emissions only. The resilience of the biosphere and the Earth system needs to be regenerated and enhanced." "A shift in perspective and action is needed that includes extending management and governance ... to rebuilding and strengthening resilience through investing in portfolios of ecosystem services for human wellbeing in diversity-rich social-ecological systems."<sup>6</sup>



Source: Folke, Polasky, Rockström et al., "Our future in the Anthropocene biosphere", *Ambio* 2021, 50:834–869

<sup>6</sup> <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s13280-021-01544-8.pdf>

Employee driven Green Groups should stress this message wherever they can, since it will determine the speed and depth of the transition, and also the speed of the change our markets will see. As companies, we can shape this change and benefit from it, or react to it defensively and lose our ground to the competition. Any level of ambition which is half-hearted only, attempting to make smaller adjustments to marginal symptoms while leaving the main business frames unchanged, is bound to fail both on an ecological and on a business level. “Now, in the Anthropocene, a continuous expansion mimicking the development pathways of the past century is not a viable option for shifting towards sustainable futures. (p. 858)” The more convincingly employees demand this fundamental change, the more they will help their companies to ensure their lasting business success.

## **6) Be tolerant and understanding**

The Climate Crisis is not the result of a binary choice, or of an epic battle of the good against the bad. It is the result of an economic system which has overwhelmingly incentivized the accumulation of money alone, while neglecting to incentivize the protection and regeneration of our fundamental natural resources. We are currently seeing a transition of this system. But in the past - and to a significant extent still today - players in any given market acted perfectly logically from a management perspective if they pursued their own individual monetary interest at the expense of the common good. There have of course been - and still are - severe ethical failures and wilful atrocities to nature by businesses across the globe. But we have to accept and to appreciate that managers and employees for the most part did what they felt they had to do. Criticizing or shaming them for it may be understandable from an environmentalist perspective, but it serves no purpose if we want to change the system together now.

By enlarge, all of us are part of the problem as it is, both causing and benefitting from it one way or another. And all of us can be, and have to become part of the solution now. We are all permanently creating and reinforcing the economic system which is destroying our planet, so we all have a role to play in turning it around. We are the experts of this system, since we have created it. We are therefore also the experts when it comes to giving it a new direction.

Green Groups should go to great lengths to emphasize this message in any action they take, since otherwise they will not get the buy-in from the experts they need to

have on board. We all want to live on a healthy planet, we all want to have a future for our children, we all want to make a decent living, and we all want to work for successful companies. These aspirations are no contradictions, and we should avoid pitting them – and us – against one another. We are all playing on the same team. That is also the main reason why we can still win this game, if we finally set our hearts and minds to it.

## **7) Be structured and persistent**

The impact of employee driven Green Groups largely depends on the resources and structures they have available for their work. If they can only pursue their tasks as volunteers after work, if they have to organize everything themselves, if they are not well represented and connected within the organization, and if their work is not supported by relevant sponsors high up in the hierarchy, then they will have a very hard time achieving lasting and tangible change. In our approach with planetgroups we therefore stress the need for clear and regular meeting structures, and for an explicit time budget which can be spent freely on what we call “planet projects” by any planetgroup member. Usually we calculate that on average 1 hour per week is spent just on preparing and attending planetgroups meetings, while 2 hours per week is a standard “allowance” for planet projects that every engaged employee can spend as he or she decides. On top, a smaller core team within the planetgroup (usually consisting of HR, Communication, Sustainability and representatives of the most important business units) usually takes on the task of a secretariat to the group. Last not least we encourage that planetgroup members are offered some kind of training course by the company which they can attend together, thereby strengthening not only their skillset on the subject matter, but also their organizational cohesion and motivation.

All of this is a huge invest on the company’s side. But the return far outweighs the effort. On top of making the company more successful by making it more sustainable, this approach also raises the level of expertise on sustainability within the business internally, without having to hire (and finance) a sizeable sustainability team or extensive external consultancies. It also fosters cross-departmental collaboration, it makes the company more attractive to outside candidates, and it creates an amazing add-on among the workforce – far beyond just the core planetgroup members - in terms of inspiration, purpose, engagement, innovation and customer centricity

## **8) Look for best practice examples, benchmarks and exchange**

We human beings are social animals. We do more or less what the others expect us to do. And we change when we see other people change, especially when we know and trust them. The best way to change your own company, therefore, is to point out other companies that are already doing so, or have successfully done so and benefitted from it.

So an Employee Green Group should always try to find as many examples from comparable companies in comparable industries as possible, exchange and learn from them, and use them to convince their own people that change is not only possible, but positive and beneficial. Accordingly, it is one of the key aspects of our work with planetgroups to organize exchange and mutual learning from each other, opportunities for sharing project experiences, successes, and also failures and errors along the way. In our planetgroups network, we provide access to an online collaboration platform (called the PlaNet) with that purpose, and we regularly organize MeetUps both within the company and between companies working on comparable projects and solutions.

## **9) Enjoy the process and celebrate successes**

Last not least there is one advice which we like to give to any employee driven Green Group: Make it fun and appreciative. This recommendation has two reasons: our own wellbeing as climate actors, and our effectiveness as such.

With regard to our wellbeing, we are trying to save the planet and to create a better world, right? We are doing this because we believe life is precious. So let's enjoy it accordingly. We do not live in the future, we live in the presence. While it is good to care about the future and to be a "good ancestor", we can only do so much in one life, and we should not feel inadequate because of our shortcomings. Saving the world is important and meaningful, we should be proud of ourselves and it should feel good.

With regard to our effectiveness, research continuously proves that people are best motivated when they can connect with others, pursue a higher purpose, and when they feel that they have an impact through their actions. If Green Groups want to drive change in their organizations, they should make sure that their colleagues feel

that way – connected, purpose driven and impactful. This is most easily achieved through positive messaging, enjoyable meetings, and constant recognition of everybody involved for their efforts and results.

In our planetgroups process, we therefore try to design our meetings as playful and intuitive as possible, avoiding lengthy and academic discussions and getting into action and tangible results as quickly as possible. We organize group processes whenever we can within group sizes of maximum six, we provide clear structures for each step of a process, we assign a relevant space and structure for awarding recognition (and prizes) to others, and we include tasks (like creating a short imagefilm for each planet project) which are memorable, fun and inspiring to do.

Celebrating successes is important not only to keep spirits and energy up, but also to generate further momentum and dynamics for change both within and beyond the organization. Not the least, one important benefit of striving for sustainability is the additional brand value it creates – both towards customers, communities, employees and candidates. Celebrating successes and producing entertaining pictures and video footage about them helps to support this positive branding process – which then again makes other companies want to follow suit.

## How to start and run a successful Green Group in your company

Reading these nine recommendations on how to start and run a successful Green Group in your company, it may seem like an impossible task to achieve. However, many employees and many companies have done so successfully, and so can you.

If you like to have the support of our NGO planetgroups, you can send us an e-mail to [info@planetgroups.net](mailto:info@planetgroups.net). We are happy to contribute, and our help is always free of charge until we get your management "on board". We are happy to have a first call any time.

But also without us, there is a lot you can do, and no reason to be timid. Look for likeminded colleagues, involve strategic functions like HR, Communication, Sustainability or Strategy, and make sure you get the necessary buy-in and resources needed to be successful. The nine recommendations above are meant to be helpful for designing your process and shaping your strategy. But surely, every company is different, every Green Group has its unique context, opportunities and constraints. Everything you start will serve a purpose and influence the dynamics of the system. There is no reason not to start.

Good luck and success with it!

The planetgroups founding team

(Tim Riedel, Susan Kench, Andreas Kästner, Kevin Wiles)