

By ReGeneration

Employee Activism Resources



Acknowledgements

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About Re_Generation

[Re_Generation](#) is a Canadian youth movement that seeks to build a regenerative, sustainable, and just economy. We aim to reimagine our schools, repurpose our careers, and remodel our companies to be aligned with regenerative principles. In particular, we provide resources for individuals to launch impact-driven careers and advocate for change within their companies and schools. We also aim to advance public policies that promote regenerative and sustainable business practices.

Our successful 'Our Future, Our Business' Manifesto campaign received the support of 65 youth organizations, 130 high-level executives, and 100 civil society organizations recognizing the need for reform in business education on sustainability. After three years of existence as the Canadian Business Youth Council for Sustainable Development, we have changed our name to Re_Generation to become more inclusive of all youth, not just business youth.

We believe that the ideal society is a [regenerative](#) one. Regeneration to us means putting human and ecological [well-being](#) at the centre of every decision. It means restoring relationships, both within nature and within society, while helping all communities to thrive. Read more about our history and vision at our [About Us](#) page.

The Company Transition Toolkit is intended as a guide for employee activists to advocate for transformative change within their organizations. Using this Toolkit, employees can evaluate their employer's performance on social and environmental issues and help their companies become more sustainable and just. The Toolkit combines resources and self-assessment questions from a variety of sources that are organized into four key issue areas: ecological well-being, human well-being, business ethics, and business model and governance.

The resources available in this Toolkit are not intended just for sustainability and CSR teams, but rather any employee in any company that is interested in being a voice for change. Most importantly, the Toolkit aims to help employees understand the difference between greenwashing and genuinely impactful sustainability efforts, and hold employers accountable to their promises. As insiders, employees are uniquely positioned to determine whether a company is acting meaningfully on social and environmental issues, and gather the knowledge, resources, and support to push for more ambitious action.

Rise in Employee Activism

We are living in a time when [employee activism is becoming even more powerful than CEO activism](#). From 4,000 Amazon workers filing a shareholders' resolution to challenge the company's position on climate issues, to 20,000 Google employees staging a walkout in protest of lax sexual harassment policies, employee voice has never been such a [major factor in our culture or politics](#). Recent analysis finds that there was a [three-fold rise in employee activism events between 2019 and 2020](#), and evidence from another survey indicates that as many as two in five employees of medium to large-sized firms have engaged in employee activism of some kind. Many employees are becoming more vocal about making their work reflect their values; a letter signed by more than [1,100 McKinsey employees](#) called on the company to cut ties with fossil fuel companies, while a group of law students at Yale and Harvard have begun [boycotting internships](#) with firms that represent Exxon Mobil. It also seems as though this shift is here to stay—[88% of North American executives](#) expect employee activism to surge over the next three to five years.

According to NYU Stern Professor Alison Taylor, there are [many factors which have led to this rise in employee voice](#), chief among which is an increase in the power of workers. There has been a wave of [new unionization campaigns](#) and [strike actions](#), accompanied by a large increase in the [number of resignations](#), which together signify that many employees feel more empowered to voice their values and advocate for change than they have in the past. Secondly, due to the rise of social media, whistleblowing against corporate misbehaviour has become a collective activity. Social media amplification allows information to be weaponized by activists to increase reputational risk through generating public controversy, and employers can no longer rely on confidentiality or secrecy clauses to prevent the public sharing of sensitive information. Employee activism is also driven by generational differences among younger employees, many of whom care more about social purpose and expect better from their employers. PwC's [Workforce of the Future](#) survey found that 88% of millennials want to work for a company whose values reflect their own, indicating that companies which continue to erode social and environmental value might find it increasingly difficult to recruit new employees.

Tactics and Strategies

The rise of employee activism has also led to the creation of a new type of change agent: the [social intrapreneur](#), or someone from within a company who helps reform internal processes and identify opportunities to create change using social and sustainable innovation. As this article from the Harvard Business Review shows, it is possible for a [single person to change the conscience of an organization](#), especially when they inspire like-minded individuals and help create a movement. To learn more about social intrapreneurship, see [this portal from Yunus Social Business](#).

All employee activists should take the opportunity to educate themselves on social and environmental issues, and acquire a high degree of sustainability literacy in order to adequately assess their company's performance. The second stage of employee activism involves finding allies, organizing for change, and helping to spread the word through meetings, workshops, conferences, and informal channels such as internal message boards. Through organizing and building connections, activists can help work with other interested partners to develop a theory of change, or an advocacy strategy that focuses on particular concrete outcomes. Theories of change can include the goal of changing individual corporate practices, or the larger, more systemic goal of changing a company's entire business strategy from the ground up to become more purpose-driven.

Employees can begin by asking a very simple question: is there clear alignment between an organization's external rhetoric (as outlined in its sustainability or CSR reports and marketing strategy), and its actual internal operational practices? Using the resources contained in the Company Transition Toolkit, employees can analyze their company's existing sustainability reports and engage with internal sustainability teams to determine whether a corporation's sustainability efforts are leading to genuine change. Once this question has been answered, employee activists can advocate for the adoption of new targets and strategies, or the allocation of greater organizational resources (including increased budget and staffing allocations and new capital investments) towards sustainability and social impact initiatives. Employees can also advocate for the creation of a [shadow board program](#) to increase worker involvement in decision-making, and create greater engagement between senior officers and employees. Shadow boards have been proven to be an excellent source of crowd-sourcing new ideas, outside of the box thinking, and participatory innovation.

Other common techniques used by employee activists, according to [this article from the Stanford Social Innovation Review](#), include the following activities:

- Internal coalition-building by forming new employee resource groups;
- Hosting educational events;
- Mobilization by creating new internal employee networks (i.e. sharing information on the company intranet, creating new message boards);
- Polls or data collection;
- Coordinating petition or email campaigns.
- Press conferences;
- Shareholder resolutions;
- Posting information on social media;
- Sharing information with NGOs, news media, and external organizations;
- Employee walkouts and protests;
- Coordinating with activists in other companies;

As the above article demonstrates, there is no limit to the number of actions that employees can use in

the pursuit of organizational change, which range from more disruptive to more persuasive in nature. Particularly important is the formation of new Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), which are internal networks of employees with a common interest in a particular issue area. ERGs have the opportunity to be very transformative; a [climate-focused ERG](#) at the European insurance company AXA helped to generate internal educational resources, such as a Masterclass on Sustainable Finance, through the formation of an 'AXA Climate School' that has helped inform finance professionals throughout the company about climate-related risks and the need for societal transformation. The AXA ERG now has over 1,000 members, with 600 trained employees in total.

Steps for Changemaking

1. Use the Company Transition Toolkit and associated resources to analyze your company's performance.

To begin, you can seek to educate yourself using the resources and self-assessment questions outlined in the Company Transition Toolkit and other sources. It is important to get a sense of the most salient social and environmental issues that your company has an impact on or can influence, which can differ significantly by sector. Once these issues have been identified, you can review the issue-specific pamphlets contained in the Transition Toolkit to get a more granular understanding of how to measure progress on these grand challenges, whether it includes human rights, inequality, greenhouse gas emissions, or other problems.

Next, you can review your company's existing sustainability reporting and CSR strategy (if it exists) to ensure alignment with international best practices. Crucial questions to ask include:

- Strategy
 - What issues are included, and what issues are ignored?
 - What is the organization's current sustainability strategy, and is it linked with its overall business strategy? Is the company's business strategy purpose-driven, with explicit reference to social and environmental value creation?
 - What is the company's purpose or core reason for being? Is it a social purpose, and if not, why?
 - Is this world better off because your business is in it?
- Goals and Measurement
 - What targets and goals are used, and how has the company performed in relation to these goals? Are these targets specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely?
 - Are targets based on outcomes (i.e. emissions reductions by a certain date) rather than actions (i.e. increasing spending on new technologies)?
 - Do transition plans include clear implementation plans with specific annual expenditure plans and explanations of potential gaps?
 - How is performance measured? What indicators are used, and are they sufficient?
 - What international reporting methodologies are used to create the sustainability report? Does the company use standards from the [Global Reporting Initiative](#), the [Sustainability Accounting Standards Board](#), the [Carbon Disclosure Project](#), the [Taskforce on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures](#), or other initiatives? What is the rationale for this choice?
 - Is the data contained in sustainability reports externally verified?
- Integration and Management
 - Is the company collaborating with external partners, including suppliers, customers, government, academia and even competitors to address its top social and environmental issues?

- How is the sustainability strategy embedded throughout the organization? Is sustainability siloed in a particular team, or is sustainability performance a requirement of most jobs?
- Do senior leaders have direct responsibility for sustainability management? Are senior leaders compensated on the basis of their sustainability performance, and are these targets ambitious?
- Are there appropriate organizational resources allocated to sustainability and social impact initiatives? Are sustainability initiatives receiving the appropriate funding and staffing allocations? Are these sustainability initiatives core and material to the company's operating model?
- Is sustainability reflected in the corporation's mainstream financial reporting, particularly in sections relating to capital expenditures and investments?
- In your opinion, is your firm greenwashing? Is sustainability strategy seen as a business strategy, or simply a marketing strategy? Does the company publicize positive events in order to conceal negative ones?

You can research in particular whether or not a company's goals are linked to relevant external thresholds and limits, such as the planetary boundaries and minimum social safeguards outlined in the [doughnut economics framework](#). More information about the process of contextualizing company goals is provided throughout this Toolkit, particularly in Section 4.3 on Transparency and Reporting. Sample self-assessment questions include:

- Does your company's emissions reduction plan reference the [global carbon budget](#) that is required for a [1.5 degree temperature rise](#), as outlined in the Paris Climate Accord? You can use the [Transition Pathway Initiative](#) to see if their company is listed as being consistent with a 1.5 degree future.
- Does your company's human rights policy reference and respect the provisions of the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#)?
- Do your company's labour practices respect the stipulations of the [fundamental Conventions of the International Labour Organization](#)?

For more information about embedding sustainability in organizational culture and structure, you can review this manual for [change management for sustainable development](#), as well as this blueprint for ['making sustainability stick'](#).

You can also seek to become effective advocates by reviewing these [resources about becoming a change agent](#) from the [Embedding Project](#). There are many strategies for [becoming an effective change agent](#), as outlined in [this inventory](#) which provides a useful self-assessment tool for employees beginning their activist journey. To become an effective climate intrapreneur, see [this guide from Green America](#).

2. Engage with existing sustainability and CSR teams.

Following this research, you can engage with existing sustainability and CSR teams, if they exist, to better understand the existing work that is going on within the organization. You might want to consider interviewing existing sustainability and CSR teams to better understand their perspectives, as well as the frustrations they experience in their day to day jobs. Critical interview questions include:

- What do they work on, and how do they spend most of their time?
- Are there things that they would prefer to be working on?
- What are the main organizational obstacles to improved performance? Are there particular individuals or departments obstructing change?
- Do they receive support from senior management? Are they encouraged to raise concerns with existing processes?
- What resources do they need to perform their job better?

- What ideas do they have for new initiatives or policy implementation that they haven't had the time to explore yet?
- What other employees do they know that are also interested in sustainability issues, and are there resource groups or internal networks focused on sustainability that already exist?

A critically important issue to understand is whether or not the existing sustainability teams are focused primarily on driving organizational change throughout the company's internal processes and external collaborations, or whether they focus most of their time on collecting information for reporting purposes. It is often the case that sustainability teams are less capable of taking on an activist role within companies because their main job task requires the majority of their time to be spent on compiling information for reporting and compliance purposes.

3. Create an internal social network by bringing together like-minded employees and uniting existing efforts.

You might want to forge ties with other sustainability-minded individuals and build cross-functional coalitions that engage employees from all departments. Creating networks is the best way to build a movement, galvanize others, and instantiate change.

Groups should aim to set a plenary group with smaller internal working groups, to create structural cohesion and improve organizational effectiveness. These working groups can be organized according to specific tasks based on interest, and delineated according to the goals and objectives of the team. The structure of these networks should be designed concentrically, with a core group of motivated and active members who lead thematic sub-groups according to specific issue area, a larger group of employees that attend regular meetings, and an even wider community of interest. For larger firms with multiple offices, including multinational firms, local groups should be set up and linked to a wider firm-wide group to encourage the formation of local initiatives while still benefiting from centralized coordination. Groups should also aim to recruit individuals from all departments, in order to obtain buy-in from as many business functions as possible. This is necessary in order to have a truly holistic approach to change management, and ensure that all senior leaders have sustainability-minded members on their team.

In establishing a group dynamic, group leaders should take care to do the following:

- Establish regular meeting times;
- Create rotating coordinator positions;
- Develop a recruitment strategy;
- Develop a communications strategy, and create public pages that people can follow;
- Commit to core values; transparency, equal voice, respect, etc.

For more information about creating productive and energizing communities where individuals feel empowered to speak their mind and embrace organizational transformation, see the resources provided by [Cworker.org](https://cworker.org), which are designed to provide resources to empower employees to advocate for change in their workplaces. Group leaders should also review these guides on [how to create communities of practice](#), and develop and [manage effective peer networks](#).

4. Organize events to increase access to educational resources.

To build awareness and garner a community of interest, you can aim to host events geared towards providing educational resources and sharing information with fellow employees. This can include hosting webinars, workshops, lunch break sessions, or even internal conferences. Groups should also establish

a clear communications strategy, with direct communication channels such as a regular newsletter or a new webpage, to reach other employees about their work and advocacy. Groups might also want to host town halls, or large events to gather employees from a variety of business functions and management levels and talk openly about what sustainability changes should take place.

In hosting public-facing events, you might want to review the key principles of storytelling and narrative creation as a way to generate persuasive arguments that win over new adherents and create interest from a wide variety of people. To do this, see the '[storytelling for sustainability](#)' manual from the Embedding Project, as well as this guide on [shaping narrative infrastructure](#).

For climate-specific education campaigns, see the [climate solutions at work report](#) by [Project Draw-down](#), as well as this [report on employee climate action](#) from [planetgroups](#). There are a variety of other organizations which provide educational climate change resources, including the following [Terra.do](#), [planetgroups](#), [The Climate School](#), and [ClimateFresk](#). Employees can also take a look at [ClimateVoice](#), a group which aims to mobilize the voice workforces to urge companies to improve their climate practices and become policy advocates.

5. Co-create and advance a specific agenda with tangible action items.

After convening interested parties and developing a group structure, you can organize around key agenda items that include specific and realistic proposals that can be taken to senior management and other decision-makers.

One unique approach is to crowd-source ideas for sustainability initiatives, and classify these proposals according to ease of implementation and level of expected impact. These proposals should go beyond simple, low-hanging fruit, such as implementing compost programs or energy efficient lighting, and instead focus on systemic changes like alternative business models, boycotting of unsustainable clients, new ownership structures, governance reforms, and other ideas.

Once these ideas have been generated, groups should democratically select the top two or three core ideas that can serve as the animating focus for an employee-led campaign. Ideas should be selected according to their concreteness, and must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely. You can also seek feedback on proposed goals from issue-area experts, and from people within your company who can speak to the feasibility of the various proposals.

Following this, employees should aim to develop realistic implementation plans regarding these goals, with a clear timeline and delineation of responsibilities that cuts across all business functions, and a communications strategy for managing the campaign (including by outlining the arguments and channels used to persuade others).

6. Engage with senior executives and other company leaders.

In order to create genuine change, engagement with senior executives is crucial. While executive opposition can kill sustainability initiatives, the endorsement of an important executive can also help lead an organizational transformation. CEOs and other senior officers should support employee activism instead of opposing it, and encourage their employees to be vocal about their values and to collectively brainstorm ways to improve sustainability performance.

You can specifically identify 'sponsors', or senior managers who can serve as allies to employee activist groups and help introduce key ideas and criticisms to the company's other senior leaders and board of directors. The identification of a sponsor is a crucial factor in getting sustainability initiatives to be taken seriously by the rest of the firm. In approaching senior executives, you might want to prepare precise and data-driven suggestions that show meticulous research and a high level of thought, with specific and tangible proposals for change, a realistic implementation plan, and a proposed budget if necessary.

You might also take care to craft arguments that will persuade senior executives to take sustainability reforms seriously. Such tactics often include the following:

- Identify parallels between sustainability proposals and the company's overall purpose or strategy;
- Emphasize that improving sustainability practices can help reduce future regulatory costs, while continuing to perform poorly increases both reputational and financial risk;
- Outline that sustainability can help create a competitive advantage, and in many cases result in reduced costs (i.e. energy savings) or new business opportunities (i.e. sustainable innovation).

When approaching senior management, you can make use of this guide from the Embedding Project on ['supporting your CEO'](#), which outlines a variety of key strategies, including to:

- Help them to create strong business cases;
- Create opportunities for them to experience sustainability issues first-hand;
- Help them learn from influential peers;
- Let the business 'fail small';
- Leverage the interests of key customers;
- Help board members to be better sustainability advocates;
- Create opportunities for them to make public commitments.

At the same time, you should be sure to remain independent of senior management and avoid being instrumentalized by senior executives who prefer to use employee resource groups as a source of positive marketing campaigns rather than actually an opportunity to implement genuine reform.

7. Engage with voices and stakeholders outside of the company

Finally, you might want to forge ties with like-minded networks outside of their company, including with employees of other companies that share similar objectives, as well as NGOs and media partners that can provide more information and resources related to goal-setting, organizational change, and key social and environmental issues. You can also forge relationships with stakeholders within your company's value chain, including clients and suppliers, to help build supportive voices from key partners on all sides. You might also want to involve yourself in wider activist campaigns and social movements, or get involved in politics, in order to actively participate in the creation of a cultural environment that is conducive to sustainability reforms and imposes pressure on senior leaders to make decisive public commitments.

At the same time, the risk of speaking out or taking action that may seem adversarial to your employer can be daunting, and many employees might fear taking a critical position. This is a valid concern. However, resistance to change and a culture of fear are signs of a dysfunctional organization, and if employees fear being reprimanded or fired because of their desire to advance an ethical position, then it is likely that this kind of organization is not worth working for. In the age of [the Great Resignation](#), employees have more power than ever, and employers are well aware that employees (particularly younger ones) expect their work to reflect their values. You shouldn't be afraid to stand up for your morals, and managers should understand that [the days when a culture of intimidation and secrecy could be used to conceal harmful or immoral behaviours are long over](#).