

Conversations About Sustainability

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Starting a conversation about sustainability can be difficult. It's a complicated topic that sometimes requires people to understand some very technical ideas. Given that it also involves people's lifestyles, choices and values, it can be quite sensitive, too.

It's possible to make people aware of the need for more sustainable choices without it turning into a science lesson, a criticism of what they're doing now, or a political debate. You don't want to alienate them or cause them to become defensive.

This is particularly important in the workplace, where you need to protect your working relationships. Any efforts you make to promote sustainability need to be professional and respect your colleagues' boundaries.

Let's take a look at some strategies for starting the sustainability conversation at work and how you can inspire your colleagues to take action without creating tension.

Keep it personal. Speak from your own experience and knowledge of sustainability. Rather than making general recommendations, share what you're doing and the benefits you're getting from it. If you show you have a genuine, personal interest in the topic, it's much less likely that your colleagues will think you're trying to force them to behave in a certain way and become defensive as a result.

To help with this, don't bring up sustainability on its own. See if you can casually introduce it into a conversation you're already having, as you would with anything else you're interested in and are excited to share.

Make sure you're demonstrating good sustainability practices yourself.

If someone notices something you're doing, it's a good opportunity to explain your own personal reasons for making that choice. For instance, if you're using a set of reusable bamboo cutlery and someone comments on it, replying "I'm trying to avoid single-use plastics." is much less confrontational than saying that everyone should be avoiding single-use plastics. Hopefully, it will inspire people to seek out more information.

Modelling sustainable habits builds trust by showing that you really do believe in what you're promoting. Writing for [The Greater Good Science Centre at UC Berkeley](#), Art Markman explains: "If you engage in the same behaviours you expect of others, then you're exhibiting the highest form of authenticity."

Seeing you perform a particular action also humanises the suggestion for someone. That's incredibly powerful, as sustainability can be a very daunting topic for many people.

In a [2022 consumer behaviour study](#) by Deloitte, 48% of people felt that a lack of information kept them from making more sustainable choices, while 41% thought it was too difficult. If colleagues see you doing something specific and can ask for a clear explanation of the benefits, it makes sustainability seem a lot more manageable and attainable.

Be careful with jargon.

Sustainability is a minefield of complex and technical terms. While this can help you to explain things accurately, it can also be off-putting for people. It might even leave them feeling more negatively towards the topic than when you started.

An [experiment by academics at Ohio State University](#), published in the Journal of Language and Social Sciences in 2020, found that jargon made it more difficult for someone to understand a scientific topic and negatively impacted how interested they were in it. Worse, it seemed to cause them to underestimate their ability to understand scientific topics in general.

As lead researcher Hilary Shulman [explains](#): “The use of difficult, specialized words are a signal that tells people that they don’t belong. You can tell them what the terms mean, but it doesn’t matter. They already feel like that this message isn’t for them.”

So, while it’s important not to patronise someone, make sure the language you use when talking about sustainability is clear and accessible.

Talk about all the benefits of sustainability.

We often focus on the environmental and ethical aspects of sustainability, but this might not be the best way to reach your colleagues. You might get further by approaching it from a financial or business angle.

For instance, if someone mentions your reusable water bottle, you could tell them all about the money and time you’ve saved by using it, rather than immediately diving into the environmental benefits.

While the value of sustainability might seem obvious to you, remember that other people have different priorities and concerns. Helping people to see how sustainability can feed into what matters to them already is a key part of convincing them that they should care.

In a [TED Talk](#), climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe explains: “I truly believe, after thousands of conversations that I’ve had over the past decade and more, that just about every single person in the world already has the values they need to care about a changing climate. They just haven’t connected the dots.”

Never shame anyone for not doing enough.

While it can be tempting to make people feel guilty to motivate them to change, this strategy will make you seem judgemental and aggressive. You don’t want to be seen as a source of negativity within the team.

Remember that you aren’t familiar with your colleagues’ circumstances - there could be many reasons why they can’t commit to more sustainable choices. In the [consumer study by Deloitte](#) that we mentioned earlier, 52% of people said that financial concerns kept them from living more sustainably.

Share good sustainability news.

The sustainability conversation understandably gets quite dark and desperate at times. In fact, 63% of people reported feeling somewhat negative or very negative about the future of the environment in a [survey by the UK's Office for National Statistics](#).

While helping people recognise the seriousness of the situation is important, you don't want to make them feel hopeless. That could make them question the point of taking action at all.

Instead, make sure you show them that there are positive steps being made every day. This will leave them feeling that they can actually make a difference and optimistic about what a sustainable future could be like.

In her TED Talk, Katharine Hayhoe calls this having 'rational hope'. She explains: "we need a vision of a better future — a future with abundant energy, with a stable economy, with resources available to all, where our lives are not worse but better than they are today."

Of course, to really make sustainability a priority in the workplace, you need management to commit as well.

Before you raise the topic with your manager, it's important to understand what steps the business is already taking. If you don't know and can't easily find out, ask your manager directly. Providing you're respectful of their time, this is a good way to start a dialogue and show you're interested.

If you have specific suggestions for sustainability initiatives, make sure you've thought them through from every angle. You need to be able to communicate the costs and benefits upfront. Remember that your manager has a lot to think about - you need to make it immediately clear how the suggestion will serve the business.

Even though being clear on your numbers is crucial, remember too that you're asking your manager for their input, not delivering a presentation. [In a Forbes Article](#) on pitching ideas to your manager, business coach Chris Westfall advises: "Invite the expertise into the conversation, don't challenge it."

So, be clear on what you're suggesting, but approach the conversation as a collaboration - a chance for you and your manager to find the best solution together.

Having a conversation about sustainability can be tricky, but it can also be a very positive experience.

To make sure you do it in a way that doesn't turn into a lecture, lead by example and use that as a way to show people your passion for sustainability. It's far

easier to convince someone to do something when they can see you're already doing it.

To ensure your colleagues really hear you, steer clear of jargon and try to connect sustainability to things they're already thinking about. Don't shame people for not doing more, and remember that living more sustainably will look different for everyone.

Lastly, make sure you show that sustainability can be a force for good. You want to empower people to envisage a better, more sustainable future. That's especially important when talking to your manager - you need to show them that sustainability is an opportunity for the business.

Today, start looking for a chance to bring sustainability into a conversation you're already having with a colleague. Maybe share a piece of positive sustainability news or mention one of the sustainable habits you've adopted and why it works for you.

Your personal experience and enthusiasm are the best tools you have when it comes to inspiring people to think differently about sustainability.