Green team: Why you want one and tips for keeping it going

There is a lot of talk out there about the environment and business. "Going green," "triple bottom line," "green business," "climate neutral," "environmentally friendly," "zero impact," and "green consciousness" are only some of the words being tossed around by companies trying to figure out what sustainability means to them and how it may impact day-to-day work. As a result, many organizations are forming "green teams" to focus on sustainability related questions and identify what needs to be done.

You may be thinking, "Why form a green team?" You could just tell your purchasing department to order recycled paper, only order office supplies labeled environmentally friendly or maybe set up some recycling bins. While these are good things, there is a bit more to going green and taking a triple bottom line approach — people, planet, profit — and green teams can help your business get there.

A green team is a core group of people from across your organization that is composed of staff, community members or other parties determined by you, which have a common goal of helping your business reach its sustainability goals. Each team member brings a unique perspective to the table from both the department they represent and their personal experiences. Teams comprised of both volunteer members and employees who have been assigned this responsibility tend to bring the necessary combination of passion and accountability to the table that is required to sustain an active green team.

Green teams may be able to offer a creative solution to a problem. An example of this may be when you are looking for ways to cut costs on building maintenance. Asking your green team to evaluate an existing plan and make recommendations could result in suggestions such as replacement of existing lighting with CFLs, removal of unneeded fixtures or equipment, or installation of hand dryers to replace paper towels. This would not only reduce staff hours because of the longer life of a CFL bulb and less time spent emptying trash bins, but also result in energy savings, cost savings and waste reduction. Another example is tasking your green team with identifying incentive and grant programs to fund green building improvements. These can lead to increased equity and improved work environments, making your business attractive to today's top-notch employees who consider environmental sustainability a priority in today's market.

So now that you have decided your organization must have a green team, here are some tips to help get you started.

The first steps to ensure a strong start and create a solid foundation for any green team are gaining and maintaining leadership support.

- Make your green team a visible part of organizational structure and authorize time to do the work. Formalizing a green team validates the work of the team and affirms commitment.
- Incorporate a sustainability statement into the mission and values of your organization. This generates visibility, both internally and externally, and reinforces interest while encouraging active participation from all employees.
- Incorporate sustainability-related goals into the larger organizational strategic plan. This reinforces the company’s commitment to sustainability.

Once your green team has been charged, it is time to move forward.

- Meet regularly and walk away from every meeting with clear action items. This gives the team something to "work forward to."
- Identify initiatives and priorities — set priorities and move ahead on net-saving/no-cost/low-cost recommendations while planning longer projects or identifying funding opportunities. Make sure to project, track and identify both cost savings and environmental impacts.
- Create a living action plan. A living action plan is something that is flexible with a clear goal. This allows teams to fluidly respond to the changing needs of the organization and re-prioritize when needed.
- Acknowledge achievements and set milestones that can be celebrated along the way. This helps to keep the positive energy flowing especially when working on lengthy projects. And don’t forget to thank supervisors for accommodating staff involvement, recognizing this may take away from other duties or require minor adjustments to workflows when departments agree to be the first to try new processes or test products.
- Track progress and report back — create clear measures to make it easy to identify what works and what doesn’t. If something doesn’t work, don’t be afraid to set it aside and try something else. We learn what works through trial and error.

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