

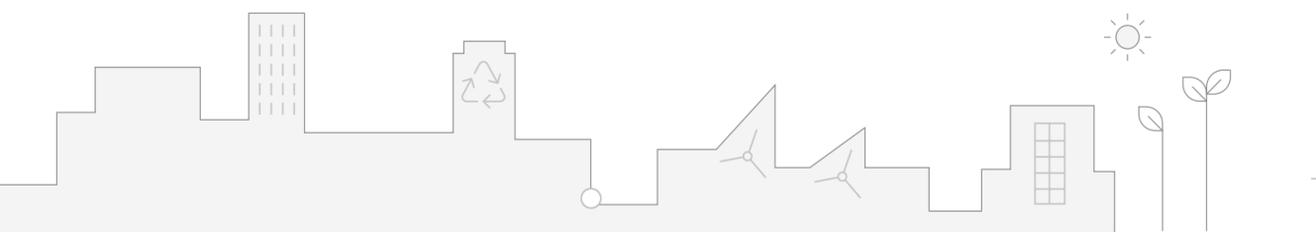
Communication can put sustainability in the driver's seat

Poor communication is almost always a root cause of disagreements or project failures. For a topic as fraught with emotion as sustainability, effective communication is essential for success. Our latest Think Circle with sustainability leaders centered on how to communicate the value of sustainability for the greatest impact and when to engage the rest of the organization in taking sustainability forward.

While the Thinkers come from a disparate set of organizations and industries, they agree that co-creation can speed progress through common challenges and sharing lessons learned can accelerate change.

“Our organizations are all living, breathing a little bit different. But if you’re able to get the tools to make business cases and show in different areas those that have perfected their supply chain, those that have used it to do x, y, z, then you can start to make really significant business cases. Because that’s what’s going to motivate leaders to do things.”

In getting to this summary, Sustainability Thinkers focused on three key themes:



1. Start with small wins to embed sustainability into the core of the business

By demonstrating value to their organizations through small efforts, Thinkers have unlocked opportunities for larger efforts. Communicating those successes means sustainability eventually becomes central to an organization’s day-to-day operations.

“If sustainability is not embedded in the operational discussions, we will be a sidecar to the motorcycle. And you’ll never get to drive it if you’re sitting in a sidecar.”

“How do we get those small wins so that sustainability becomes an enduring conversation, not just something that is being driven top-down but woven into how we do business.”

“The thing which was most effective from an implementation standpoint was not trying to do really big things, but starting really small with little things that matter. There are a thousand little things you can do to improve sustainability and if I aggregate those things, I can start to be confident in the sustainability wins that will drive payback.”

“We don’t talk about cost savings in operational excellence. We talk about total value delivered...and that really helps motivate business leaders to go after some of those initiatives from the business case.”

2. Communicate up, sideways, and out with tailored messages

By demonstrating value to their organizations through small efforts, Thinkers have unlocked opportunities for larger efforts. Communicating those successes means sustainability eventually becomes central to an organization’s day-to-day operations.

“We’re bringing in tailored data sets to tell stories to different audiences—CFO, legal, CHRO. A customized message can be very effective, but at the same time, it becomes a lot of different stories to chase. Where the rubber meets the road is that the business teams have to integrate the rest of their metrics with sustainability.”

“It’s about going back to materiality. What’s material, what you need to move within your business, what you need to focus on. And that’s where the data differs.”

“We were able to get ten points on our company scorecard, which dictates employee bonus payouts tied to sustainability. It created a pull from the business to say: ‘How do we contribute to this? What am I already doing that qualifies towards this?’”

“We use live dashboards that turn red or green based on the energy per unit or water per unit. That’s more engagement day-to-day. But the day-to-day feeds target improvement long term and feeds a competitiveness to say who can be best in class.”

3. Establish internal data and external benchmarks

Data underpins the ability to engage and communicate with key stakeholders. Relevant and timely data can integrate sustainability insights into the daily decisions made by the C-suite or people on the factory floor. Internal data is essential, but benchmarking performance against peers and competitors is one of the most effective ways to build the case for action.

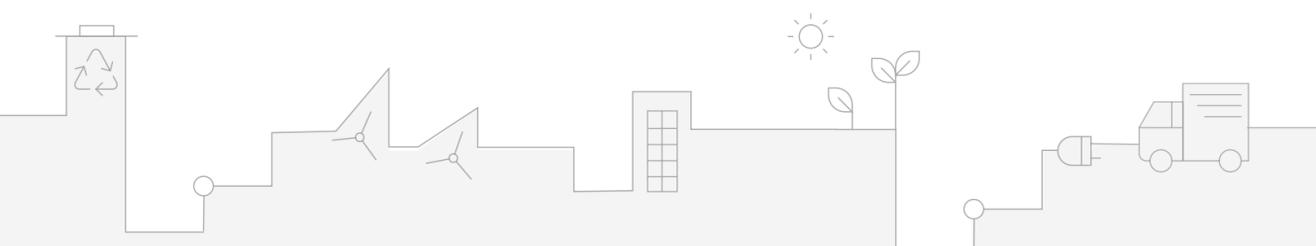
“Sustainability is now integrated with everything else that we have in safety, quality, delivery, and cost, and that’s very important. It helped drive an understanding of where our bottlenecks were and why can’t we deliver the same performance as our competitors do.”

“The most powerful tool at my disposal was benchmarking against competition. The C-suite is always looking over their shoulder.”

Sustainability insights by the numbers

In a recent study from the IBM Institute for Business Value, we asked 5,000 C-suite executives in 22 countries across 22 industry sectors how they approach and operationalize sustainability. Here’s what we found:

- 76% say that sustainability is central to their business strategy.
- Six in 10 executives say they have to make trade-offs between financial and sustainability outcomes.
- Only 31% of organizations report they are incorporating sustainability data and insights into operational improvements to a great extent.
- Spending on sustainability reporting exceeds spending on sustainability innovation by 43%.
- Organizations that embed sustainability are 52% more likely to outperform their peers on profitability, with a 16% higher rate of revenue growth.



Related resources

- [Beyond checking the box: How to create business value with embedded sustainability](#) provides insights into how organizations can move from doing sustainability to being more sustainable.
- [The CEO’s guide to generative AI](#) is a comprehensive book, or 12 individual reports, highlighting what executives need to know and do as they embrace generative AI, with a deep dive on generative AI in sustainability.
- [The ESG data conundrum](#) shows how organizations can unlock more value from their ESG data.
- [Seven bets](#) is our look at the trends shaping the world today—and the bets that can help propel business forward.
- [The power of AI: Sustainability](#) is our point of view on the potential of AI for sustainability.

IBM Institute for Business Value

Published in partnership with IBM Think Circles