

Seven Barriers to Company Sustainability Achievement

Closing the Intention to Achievement Gap

A goal of many sustainability programs is to achieve environmental and social goals, and close the gap between intention (target) and achievement (impact). A critical, yet often forgotten, first step a company must take is to identify and name its biggest barriers. If skipped, often under resourced sustainability teams cannot direct their limited means effectively and get spread too thin. A vicious cycle results: lack of progress > leadership/team frustration > increased difficulty securing resources > lack of progress. Instead, the goal is to focus attention on a toolkit of solutions aimed specifically at each barrier, one at a time, for deeper progress.

The following list identifies common barriers hindering progress. This can be applied at a program-wide scale (the whole sustainability program) or at the initiative scale (waste reduction, transportation, etc.) Use this screening checklist to see if the barrier is present in your organization.



Screening Checklist

This list was created by examining trends from working with over forty different organizations across thirteen sectors to assess and improve their sustainability programs.

Barriers are generally listed in order of importance, meaning: work your way from top to bottom of list. For example, if #1 Accountability Structure, is an issue for your company, you should tackle that first before moving on to a barrier further down the list.

Lack of Funding is intentionally left off the list, as the 7 barriers on the list are often the root cause for lack of funding. Overcoming the listed barriers typically leads to increased prioritization and resources for sustainability.

1 Lack of Accountability Structure

- No single leader can speak to sustainability performance with confidence
- Sustainability responsibilities are not owned by anyone and usually executed by volunteers, if at all
- No documented policy or approach to sustainability governance, responsibility, or management
- The achievement of company sustainability goals are not in senior leaders individual KPIs

2 Lack of Clarity of What Sustainability Success Looks Like and Tie to Company Purpose

- No definitive list of what sustainability topics are material to the organization exists
- No quantitative sustainability targets that define success for sustainability exist
- Metrics for sustainability are not a part of evaluations of overall organizational performance

3 Lack Understanding of Current Sustainability Performance

- An organization-wide sustainability assessment has not been or is not periodically completed
- Lack of organization-wide awareness of current sustainability-related initiatives and needs
- Sustainability performance data is collected in siloes without rigor or clear next steps
- Lack of awareness on where the organization is on sustainability adoption journey (pioneer, early adopter, majority, laggard)

4 Lack of Sustainability Experience and Education

- There is not a "Sustainability 101" or orientation, specific to the company, for staff and leadership
- Key leaders and team members do not have a base level of sustainability education, leading to bias, flawed interpretations, and partially informed decisions
- Company culture is suspicious of sustainability as a default, voicing misnomers: "sustainability is always more expensive", "we are too big to change", or "what we do does not make a difference"

5 Inability to Deviate from Business as Usual (to a Less Certain, but More Sustainable Path)

- Internal change management support resources do not exist
- Inability to commit to sustainability initiatives, stemming from uncertainty and fear that the "sustainable" path might hinder other business objectives
- Resistance due to worry that additional sustainability duties for employees will require added resources, or compensation

6 Inability to Translate Strategy into Tactical Action

- Organization had initial momentum, but achieving goals and progress is not occurring
- Sustainability program is unrealistically broad, compared to size of staff managing and executing
- A sustainability execution plan with specific initiatives, roles and deadlines does not exist
- Internal sustainability team lacks implementation interest, experience, or skillsets

7 Inability to Communicate the Business Value of Sustainability

- Sustainable solutions are not framed as tools to achieve core business objectives (revenue, talent, risk reduction, etc.). Their sole reason for being is achieving sustainability goals
- Sustainability messaging not embedded throughout organizational communications, and is in stand-alone communications, if anywhere at all