



CEO decision-making for sustainability

Executive Guide



Network for
Business Sustainability
South Africa

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supporting CEO decision-making

Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) play a crucial role in fostering an environment that supports embedding social and environmental sustainability into the strategies and day-to-day decisions of their organisations. CEOs are uniquely situated at the interface between the external environment and the internal hierarchy of their companies. This position, cutting across all functions and locations, provides unique insights into a set of competing external issues and interests that they must balance against internal constraints. It is a holistic view, shared by few, and further developed the longer they hold the role.¹

Based on findings from interviews and an extensive review of prior research, this report responds to the question:

Why do some CEOs make the shift to incorporate sustainability into their decision-making—and what holds others back?

This report begins by explaining the CEO's perspective:

- Section I identifies the factors shaping a CEO's thinking on sustainability, from personal readiness, to the business context, to a final "gut check."
- Section II identifies three key barriers that prevent CEOs from prioritizing sustainability: lack of relevant information, an unclear

link to the core business, and competing priorities.

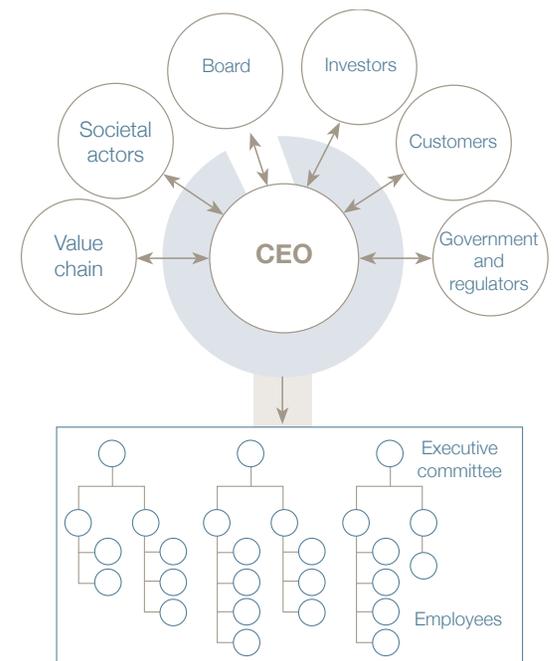
The report also identifies the role for change agents, people who can influence the CEO's perspective and actions on sustainability

- Section III captures what we learned from effective change agents about how they support their CEOs in incorporating sustainability.
- Section IV shares what CEOs told us were the qualities of influential change agents.

About the research

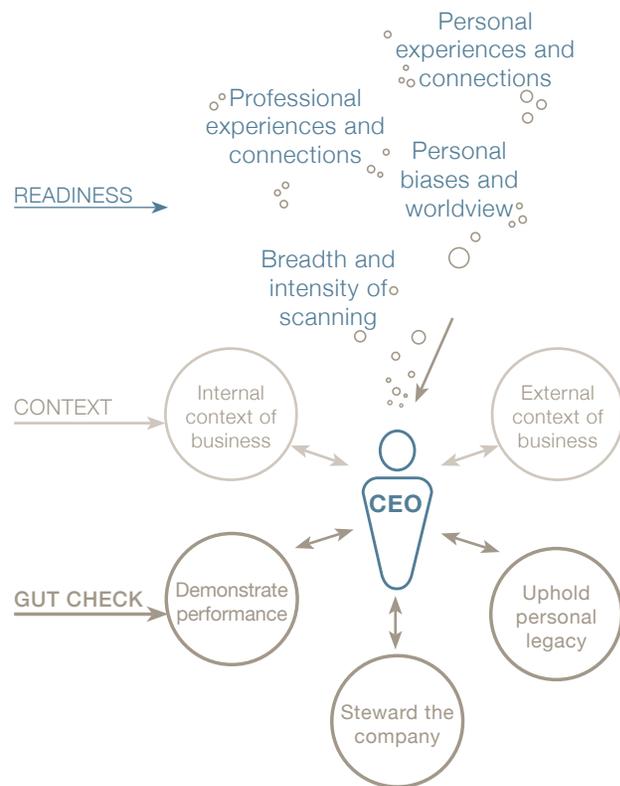
This report was inspired by the Leadership Council of the Network for Business Sustainability South Africa and conducted by Dr. Stephanie Bertels, Jess Schulschenk, Andrea Ferry, Vanessa Otto-Mentz and Esther Speck. This project involved a review of over 122 articles and 84 interviews with CEOs, chairpersons and board members, executive team members and internal and external change agents in South Africa and internationally. For additional information on the research, please see the last page of the report.

A CEO'S UNIQUE PERSPECTIVEⁱ



i. See our [main report](#) for more details on key CEO relationships

section I: what shapes a CEO's thinking on sustainability?



How CEOs think about sustainability is shaped by multiple factors, including their personal readiness, their internal and external context, and what we call a final ‘gut check.’

Personal readiness

Professional experiences and connections

We found that CEOs with more experience were more inclined to make longer term commitments to sustainability. Research supports this, identifying CEO tenure as one of the most influential characteristics that predict CEO behaviour.² Those CEOs more comfortable discussing sustainability and its strategic fit with their business described a process of building that understanding over time.

The CEOs in our study also described how their peer network shaped their willingness to address environmental and social issues. In times of uncertainty, firms are more likely to imitate the practices of other businesses to which their top executives have ties.^{2,3,4,5,6} Exposure to related decisions at other firms enables executives to learn about what practices are normal and appropriate,^{7,8,9} offering opportunities for them to be

influenced about the merits of a given practice.¹⁰

Personal experiences and connections

Many CEOs also pointed to personal experiences and connections that shaped their thinking on sustainability. In particular, the South African CEOs talked about connections to the land and the natural world gained through time spent in nature; early exposure to multi-racial settings; and the influence of family, be it their parents or their children.

“My family is really academic, scientists and social scientists. So this kind of conversation takes place a lot at home... arguments about global warming, all of that stuff. Whether you agree with it or not, there’s an awareness because of the conversation and the debate...”

—CEO

Breadth and intensity of scanning

An important role of the CEO (and the executive team, more broadly) is to identify and collect important strategic information from the external and internal environment and to provide meaningful interpretations of this information, in a process that has been called strategic sensemaking.¹¹ Such environmental scanning is distinct from, but complementary to, information gathering activities such as competitor intelligence, competitive intelligence, and business intelligence. It involves acquiring and using information about a broad range of events, trends, and relationships in an organisation's external environment, the knowledge of which would assist management in planning the organisation's future course of action. Leaders described how they actively seek out and incorporate resources that address big issues and opportunities in the world and how this knowledge shapes their approach to running the business. They also emphasized seeking out and drawing on a range of voices and perspectives.

“To understand whether things are changing, you need to have a broad set of inputs. If we're all accountants, all engineers, we see the world so much the same that we can't listen, we can't hear, we can't see it. I would like to see within a strategy team or even within the business, people starting to employ social science people, historians, a broad base of people who will effectively be ears and eyes to say, ‘Actually, society is changing,’ because it's very difficult for us to see that if you're coming from one point of view.”

—CEO

Personal biases and worldviews

A final factor that CEOs in this study identified as influencing their own engagement with sustainability issues related to their own biases and worldviews. Those CEOs more conversant in sustainability issues also tended to point to a core set of values that created bright lines in their decision-making. A CEO's values help define their field of vision, affect their selective perception, influence their interpretation of information, and shape the choices that they make.¹² Several of the CEOs in this study called for more leaders who are willing to bring their whole selves into their business decision-making instead of ‘checking their personal values at the door.’

“[[It helps] when you are already having a conversation with someone who has a mindset around broader global implications and sees their organisation in the context of those broader trends. It allowed us to have strategic conversations very quickly and easily as opposed to a situation where you need to translate sustainability implications into a language that would fit your CEO's current worldview.”

—BOARD MEMBER

Together, these factors shaped CEOs' readiness to engage in conversations about sustainability. As we discuss next, even after becoming ready to engage with the sustainability agenda, CEOs pointed to both the internal and external context of the business as constraining their ability to take action.

The business context

The internal context of the business

Unsurprisingly, CEOs identified the fiscal health of the organisation as an important influence on their willingness to prioritise sustainability investments.

“There are realities. You have to deliver a bottom line and grow your business. You have to grow your shareholder’s wealth, and do it honestly and with transparency. So I think it was a frustration. I wished one could do more, but you have a business to run and your weapon to do more, if that’s your paradigm, is a strong business.”

—CEO

The external context of the business

Similarly, CEOs pointed to external constraints created by, for instance, the global financial crises or commodity super-cycles as impacting the timing of their willingness to back sustainability commitments or investments. In extreme cases, pressure to survive and compete may cause corporations to act in socially or environmentally irresponsible ways if they believe that this approach will help them turn a profit and survive.¹³ However, other CEOs support sustainability efforts despite a difficult financial context.

“We took a very deliberate decision that despite all of the financial pressures at that time, our positioning around sustainability was something we couldn’t afford to give up because we felt that it would be increasingly important over the long term. It was a very strong attribute in a difficult phase of the business.”

—CEO

A final ‘gut check’

Needing to demonstrate performance

CEOs consistently mentioned ‘meeting performance expectations’ as a key driver of their own and peers’ decision-making. Many pointed to shifting the performance expectations for CEOs as a key lever for encouraging action on sustainability.

“On the one hand, boards say that sustainability is what they believe in, but they remunerate their people on a basis that forces them to go against this. On paper, we’re all for corporate governance, but they’re actually encouraging bad behaviour. If you don’t tackle this, we’ll be talking about this in 20 years’ time.”

—CEO

Needing to act as a steward of the company

CEOs working to advance the sustainability agenda referred to being seen as a good steward of the company. They viewed their own tenures as CEO as part of a longer evolution of the business and criticized what they described as ‘hero CEOs’ who would ‘parachute in’ for short periods of time.

Upholding personal legacy

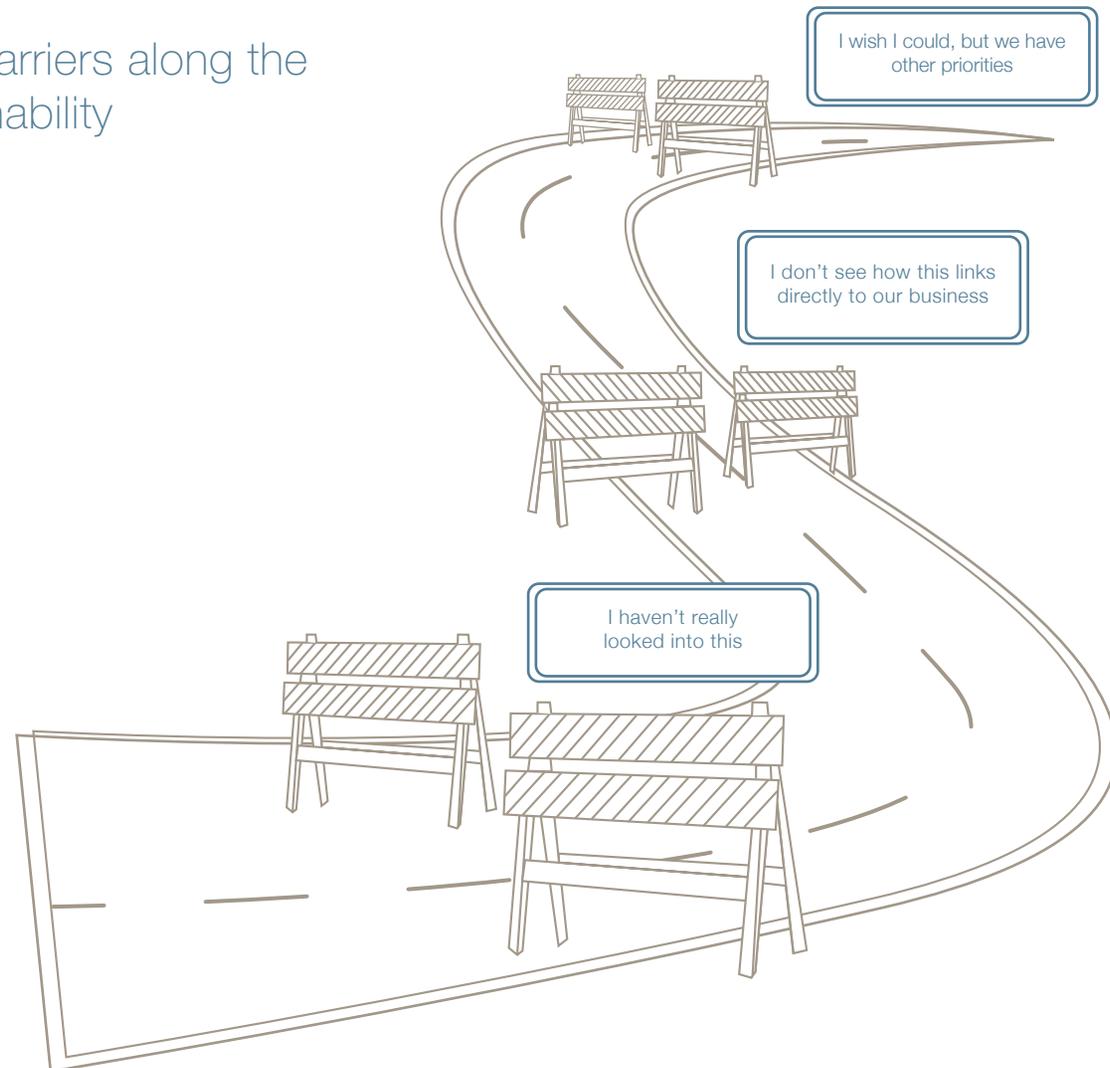
Lastly, CEOs spoke of their own personal legacy and how they did not want to be remembered as failing to act when they were called upon to do so.

“I started to ask myself, will my grandchildren say ‘What did you do when you had the chance?’”

—CEO

section II: what are the key barriers that prevent CEOs from prioritising sustainability?

CEOs described three barriers along the road to action on sustainability



I haven't really looked into this

Many CEOs haven't engaged in the kind of scanning, or had the experiences and connections, that lead them to prioritise sustainability. As we discuss in the next sections, change agents can help them build up the underlying knowledge to start to understand the core issues. A CEO provides advice to change agents:

“First, don't bring [the CEO] something that's not clearly linked to the business. Second, when you bring it, make sure that it's going to be a good show, a presentation or whether it's a few facts or an article; don't send a second-rate article just because you felt like sending an article. Send a really good article. That way if he reads it, the next time he gets an article from you he'll read it. But don't do that every second.”

—CEO

I don't see how this links directly to our business

Even when a CEO starts to understand the issues, they still need to connect these issues to their own organisation's strategy and financial outcomes.

“If I put myself in the minds of other CEOs, if you really want the business world to take sustainability seriously, we all have to find a way of linking it to the optimal survival of their company. If it's not going to be important for the company, it's going to be lip service. They can say what they want, but we are here to optimise the performance of this company.”

—CEO

I wish I could, but we have other priorities

Last, even when a CEO starts to see sustainability as relevant to the business, it still needs to compete with other strategic priorities for a limited set of resources. As an organisation's internal and external business contexts shift, CEOs may place different priority on sustainability.

“We put sustainability into our core values eight to nine years ago. But we had a lot of other work to do at the time. We got to a point about three years ago where we said ... ‘Well, we haven't really done much about this. We've put it in our values, and it is important us. We've now dealt with some of our other crises that we needed to. Let's do something.’”

—CEO

section III: how can change agents support their CEOs?



Help them create strong business cases



Create opportunities for them to experience the issues first-hand



Help them learn from influential peers



Let the business 'fail small'



Leverage the interests of key customers



Help board members be better sustainability advocates



Create opportunities for them to make public commitments



Create opportunities for them to receive recognition for this work

Here, we outline key tactics that change agents have employed to help influence their CEO's attention to sustainability.

Help them to create strong business cases

Start by helping your CEO to be able to articulate the business case. Help them understand (and when possible quantify) the risks of inaction and the potential return on investments in sustainability. Provide compelling stories that signal the potential to win new business, reduce risks, or develop innovative new products or services. Consider:

- Framing your proposals in language that clearly makes use of your company's existing strategy and how it defines business value.
- Framing your proposals in terms of business risks AND opportunities.
- Identifying your company's current or upcoming 'big projects' and showing clearly how sustainability can help improve the business value for the company.

"Every project we do, [I tell the team] 'Guys, you need to track the economic benefit of it.' I did that because previous iterations never got off the ground because no one could ever prove it. I was very adamant."

— CHANGE AGENT

Create opportunities for the CEO to experience the issues first-hand

Change agents agreed that engineering situations where your CEO can personally experience the issues is highly effective. Recent research suggests that through immersive, experiential and service learning, executives can develop and enhance capabilities that are crucial for responsible global leadership. These capabilities include a responsible mindset, ethical literacy, cultural intelligence, a global mindset, and community-building.¹⁴

In your organisation, consider the following:

- Create opportunities for your CEO to interact personally and genuinely with key community and/or supply chain stakeholders.
- Find opportunities for your CEO to experience first-hand the key ecological and social issues facing staff who are working on these challenges.

“I got together with my Chairman and we organised a day for the executive team. We invited three CEOs from other sectors, well respected, already taking action on sustainability and good storytellers. They linked it for us – how all these things are going to play out in the long run. When that big picture penny drops, it makes a very big difference, because these are big picture people we’re talking about. So, I think after that day, it just got a momentum of its own.”

—CEO

Help them learn from influential peers

Several CEOs and change agents pointed to moments where peers were able to articulate the sustainability imperative in a way that was deeply influential. Consider trying the following tactics:

- Identify respected leaders in your industry, and share articles or excerpts from speeches where they describe how sustainability issues have shaped their approach to business.
- Create an opportunity for your CEO to engage with influential peers.
- Arrange for your CEO to participate in industry and cross-industry sustainability leadership initiatives.

Let the business ‘fail small’

Several change agents pointed to moments when they let the business stumble in order to illustrate the potential for much greater failure. You can leverage failures by:

- Identifying small failures as they occur and demonstrating the value in learning from them by tying them to larger failures in other companies or industries.
- Allowing small failures to happen in order to have the organisation feel the reality of the issue at a small scale.
- Inviting others in the organisation to share their sustainability setbacks and engaging in a psychologically safe process to help them understand and prevent future issues.

“Believe it or not, one of the tactics I adopt is one of just letting mini-crises come up ... because it creates a sense of urgency. That blood rush to the brain just makes them more receptive to solutions or different solutions, because now there’s a need to deal with the problem. I just need to do the preparatory work for when the crisis hits, because I can see when it’s coming. Or you fall into the trap of fixing everything before anything ever goes wrong, so everyone goes: ‘Well what’s the big issue? Look at how great everything is!’”

— CHANGE AGENT

Leverage the interests of key customers

Addressing the sustainability demands of customers can represent a major opportunity for innovation.¹⁵ Consider leveraging the influence of key customers by:

- Identifying the sustainability challenges and opportunities of key customers and then empowering your CEO to have constructive discussions with them about these issues.
- Using customer engagement opportunities to enable your CEO to hear their sustainability-related concerns.
- Documenting cases where you have successfully earned new business by solving a sustainability problem for a customer.

“Bringing back a story from a key customer can make all the difference.”

— CHANGE AGENT

Help board members to be better sustainability advocates

Even one board member who is willing to ask the right questions can be quite influential. Change agents can leverage the power of the board by:

- Engaging the social and ethics committee and, through them, proactively making more connections to the other committees (such as audit and risk).
- Developing an understanding of where each board member is likely to stand on different sustainability issues.
- Drawing on the sustainability experience and knowledge that board members gain from their other board appointments.

“I suppose it’s seeing the board as another tool. We’re very lucky. Our chairman has been very engaged on this, but we also know that amongst the other board members, there are those who are friendly to our cause, and there are those who are not. We’ve ranked our board on how engaged they are and how supportive they are of our agenda. That really helps because you then know who to contact on what issues.”

— CHANGE AGENT

Create opportunities for CEOs to make public commitments

Several of our CEOs pointed to times when they were asked to make public commitments or to speak publicly about sustainability as pivotal moments in shaping their thinking, deepening their understanding, and formalising their commitment to sustainability.

In addition, small initial commitments generate more substantial future commitments.¹⁶ Help prepare your CEO for making public commitments:

- Find an opportunity where there will be a receptive audience.
- Prepare the speech well in advance to give your CEO time to make it their own.
- Try to include concrete, longer-term and measurable commitments.

Create opportunities for them to receive recognition for this work

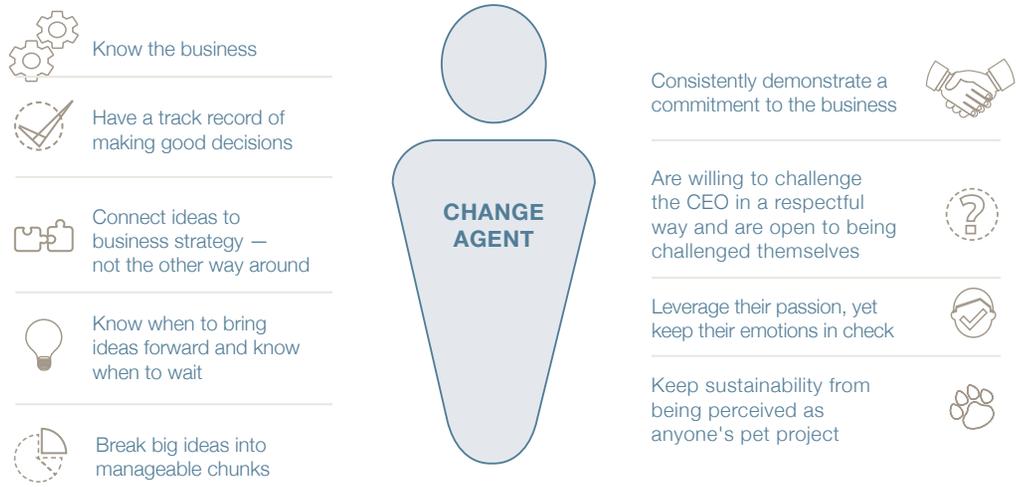
Several change agents pointed to the commitment-amplifying potential of recognition. Here is what we heard:

- Make sure your CEO and your executive team get credited for their leadership, support and vision.
- Look for opportunities where you can position them to be seen as leaders among their peers.

“Our CEO got it... He was the only CEO that presented at the event. It was the heads of responsible business or sustainability for everybody else. He gained great respect from people for standing up, and for knowing the level of detail he did. It was the right audience. We had investors, we had media, we had a real mixture of people there. They were broad enough in their knowledge and had the basics, but they weren’t experts, so it wasn’t putting him in front of technical experts ready to shoot him down. It took us four weeks or more to prepare him...”

— CHANGE AGENT

section IV: what are the qualities of effective sustainability change agents?



Effective change agents know the business

The characteristic most often mentioned by CEOs, board chairmen and even other sustainability change agents whom we interviewed was the need to really know the business. Because advancing sustainability requires such a broad range of skills, many sustainability change agents come from outside the core business. Yet, our respondents stressed that the most effective change agents knew the business inside out – they were seen as business insiders.

Effective change agents have an established track record of making good decisions

Linked with the first characteristic, effective change agents were seen to have a strong track record of making hard decisions that had turned out to be beneficial to the business.

Effective change agents connect their ideas to business strategy – not the other way around

CEOs lamented that all too often, sustainability change agents approach the executive team trying to propose a new strategy instead of clearly articulating how sustainability ties into the existing business strategy.

“For me, the key thing is to find a way to demonstrate that this is important to either make the organisation successful or to guard against the risk of it becoming unsuccessful, instead of trying to widen the definition of what success is for the organisation.”

— CEO

The challenge of triggering successful disruptive changes seems to be less about talented and visionary gurus, leading hordes of followers, and more about change agents who are able to read their environment, build innovative opportunities, and synthesise or improve change proposals that people value.¹⁷

Effective change agents know when to bring ideas forward and know when to wait

Identifying ‘transition stages’ or time periods where change is more likely requires patience on the part of change agents.

“One often gets despondent about all the work that is done that doesn’t lead to tangible outcomes. It’s often that you just need to be ready for when the crisis hits, because unfortunately, prioritisation of things often doesn’t happen until some form of crisis does hit. The first question that my CEO always throws at me is, ‘What are you going to do about this?’ It’s a question of drawing on all the initiatives that currently exist around that particular issue and then saying, ‘Should we reconsider some of the things that we have not been able to prioritise?’”

— CHANGE AGENT

Effective change agents can break things into manageable chunks

CEOs pointed to the need to break big visions for change into more concrete, incremental steps that could be more readily absorbed by the business. Also called behavioural nudges, these simple and small changes have the potential to enable significant change¹⁸ and tend to generate more substantial future commitments.¹⁹

“As much as you need to have a big vision, you also need to start doing the little things that help people to realise that it is possible. A couple of tweaks here and a couple of tweaks there.”

—CHANGE AGENT

Effective change agents consistently demonstrate a commitment to the business

The boundary-spanning role of change agents can sometimes cause organisational insiders to question their loyalty. It was recommended that change agents send clear signals about where their allegiance lies.

“It can actually weigh you down, so it’s about being very resilient through times when people think that what you’re saying is absolutely unimportant to them and nonsense. How are you so resilient so that you can be consistent with your message and what you stand for? Sometimes it is about breaking it down into achieving bit by bit.”

—CHANGE AGENT

Effective change agents are willing to challenge the CEO respectfully and be challenged themselves

Sustainability change agents need to recognise that their role may be to challenge how the CEO sees their own role in the organisation, or what the priorities of the organisation need to be at a given time. They also described how they were looking to identify new ideas that challenge the status quo in the organisation.

“I’m actually looking to have contact with people two, three levels down. You actually want it, but you obviously want it in a way that it doesn’t threaten your direct reports. The opportunities are there. You bump into each other at a cocktail function, you bump into each other at the annual or six-month results announcement, or in the passage. You just have to capitalise on the opportunity. You have to be opportunistic ... and then you’ve got to make your point very quickly. It’s just got to be in a way that it doesn’t look like it’s a reporting line challenge.”

—CEO

Effective change agents leverage their passion, yet keep their emotions in check

Change agents were also cautioned that while they needed to inspire their CEO with their passion and commitment to sustainability issues, that they need to steer clear of emotional pleas that may erode their credibility.

“Look, you’ve got to bring me more than emotions. It’s important to you, sure, great, that’s why we have you in this position, but channel that. When it comes to me, it needs to be about the business.”

—CEO

Effective change agents keep sustainability from being perceived as anyone’s pet project

A final, but important characteristic was that effective sustainability change agents were able to keep sustainability from taking on the status of any one person or group’s ‘pet project.’

“I’ve seen a reasonable number of situations where an enthusiastic CEO starts some sustainability activity and the next CEO cans it. If you’re creating something that is not really rooted in the business, then it’s just a personal hobby; it’s got no roots.”

—CEO

what next?

In addition to this Executive Guide, our comprehensive project report offers greater detail on these themes. We have also prepared a complementary set of practical tools to assist sustainability change agents in applying these findings in their own companies. We encourage you to try themⁱⁱ.

“So that’s where the sustainability thinking comes from. To say: it’s not about us now, it’s about us forever. So, how do we impact on the society around us so that we change it for the better into the future...”

—CHAIRMAN

Tools and resources

Supporting your CEO

[These tools](#) help you reflect on a set of tactics to support your CEO, catalysing better decision-making around sustainability. By scanning the inventory and the guide, you may identify tactics appropriate for your setting.

Being an effective change agent

Based on the characteristics of successful change agents identified by CEOs, we developed a [guide and inventory](#) to identify ways for you to bolster your own readiness and effectiveness.

ii. See more at: www.embeddingproject.org/resources

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about the research

This report is part of a series on CEO Decision-Making for Sustainability inspired by the Leadership Council of the Network for Business Sustainability South Africa and conducted by Dr. Stephanie Bertels, Jess Schulschenk, Andrea Ferry, Vanessa Otto-Mentz and Esther Speck. This project involved a review of over 122 articles as well as 84 interviews with CEOs, chairpersons and board members, executive team members and internal and external change agents in South Africa and internationally. Guidance for the CEO Decision-Making project was provided by Leadership Council Members Bianca Bozzone (Yellowwoods), Jon Duncan (Old Mutual Investments) and Tyrone Hawkes (Sappi) and Ralph Hamann, Kristy Faccor and Nicola Ehrlich from NBS.

About the Network for Business Sustainability South Africa

NBS-SA is hosted at the Graduate School of Business (GSB) at the University of Cape Town. This South African office is an affiliate of the Network for Business Sustainability, a non-profit based in Canada. The Network for Business Sustainability produces authoritative resources on important sustainability issues with the goal of changing management practice globally. We unite thousands of researchers and business leaders worldwide who believe passionately in research-based practice and practice-based research.

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About our Leadership Council

NBS-SA's Leadership Council is a group of South African sustainability leaders from diverse sectors. At an annual meeting, these leaders identify their business sustainability challenges — the issues on which their organisations need authoritative answers and reliable insights. Their sustainability challenges prompt each of the NBS-SA's research projects.





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