The Process of Integrating Sustainability into an Organization’s Culture

While a growing number of companies recognize the need to improve their contribution to sustainability, many struggle embedding sustainability into their culture and day-to-day operations (Lacy, Cooper, Hayward, & Neuberger, 2010). As organizational scholars, we also have a very limited understanding of how the integration of sustainability into an organization’s culture happens in practice (Millar, Hind, & Magala, 2012; Russell & McIntosh, 2011). There is much that remains to be understood about the role of various individuals in that process (Stoughton & Ludema, 2012) and, in particular, how internal sustainability change agents and direct leaders can initiate and support it (van der Heijden, Cramer, & Driessen, 2012). The overarching research question that guides our study is: how do organizations integrate sustainability into their organizational cultures?

While empirical work directly focused on integrating sustainability into an organization’s culture is limited, research investigating related phenomena such as employee environmental initiatives and leadership behaviours can provide important insights into how a range of actors might facilitate sustainability-oriented culture change (Howard-Grenville, Bertels, & Lahneman, 2014; Molnar & Mulvihiih, 2003). Research suggests, for instance, that senior leaders (Wei-Skillern, 2004), employees’ direct leaders (Stoughton & Ludema, 2012), and internal change agents (Post & Altma, 1994) might all support such processes through mechanisms including signaling and sensemaking. Yet research on the change work and efficacy of these actors, particularly internal change agents and direct leaders, is in its infancy (van der Heijden et al., 2012). Research on the issue selling of sustainability-related issues (e.g. Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Bansal, 2003; Howard-Grenville, 2007) can provide important insights into how actors outside of top management can initiate processes of culture change by drawing attention to the various moves (e.g. targeting relevant decision-makers) issue sellers can utilize.

This body of research provides a useful starting point by suggesting several mechanisms through which senior leaders, direct leaders, and internal change agents might facilitate the integration of sustainability into an organization’s culture. A longitudinal investigation of an organization’s efforts to integrate sustainability into its culture could help shed light on the relationships among these mechanisms and other important microprocesses that may facilitate or impede such changes (Howard-Grenville & Bertels, 2012; Howard-Grenville et al., 2014).

Theoretically, we adopt a practice perspective on culture, which sees culture as a repertoire of resources that individuals put to use in crafting strategies of action (Swidler, 1986; Weber & Dacin, 2011). Work in this perspective increasingly emphasizes human agency in creating and reproducing culture. In investigating changes in resources, we pay close attention to the evolution of concepts, what Munir and Phillips (2005: 1668) call the “social constructions...that form the culturally and historically situated frame for understanding social reality.” Thus, in investigating our research question, we focus on factors and mechanisms that influence changes in employees’ concepts and strategies of action related to sustainability.

To address our research question, we draw on data from a longitudinal study of one company’s efforts to integrate sustainability into its organizational culture. ManufactureCo, a global manufacturing company, recently launched Green Future, a large-scale culture change initiative focused on integrating sustainability into the daily work and decision-making of every employee. In analyzing Green Future, we adopted an exploratory, inductive research approach and a multiple case study research design, focusing our attention on six of ManufactureCo’s departments. Our adoption of a multiple case approach is appropriate given our emphasis on
uncovering processes and explanations and because it allows for a more precise delineation between emergent constructs and relationships (Yin, 2009).

Our primary sources of data for this paper were 60 semi-structured interviews, 49 days of observations, and company and project documents gathered over a one-year period. In analysing our data we worked from specific instances of the data to identify patterns and develop theory (Glaser, 1978; Locke, 2001). We began our analysis with open coding, eventually collapsing open codes into first-order categories and, finally, second-order themes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Following the identification of second-order themes, we returned to consult prior work on organizational culture change and on sustainability to explore and theorize the possible connections among those themes (Glaser, 1978).

Our first-order findings highlighted marked differences between the concepts and actions related to sustainability of three of the six departments. While members of all six departments made reference to the concept that sustainability is something valued and important and increasingly engaged in efforts to reduce the peripheral environmental impact of their work (e.g. recycling) and participating in sustainability activities (e.g. wellness events), members of three of the departments began demonstrating an expanded set of concepts (e.g. that sustainability is something they can address by changing how they work) and actions (e.g. assessing the sustainability impact of their department’s work) related to sustainability.

Upon noticing these differences, we investigated factors that would help explain these different trajectories. While all six departments were exposed to the same organization-wide Green Future communications and initiatives, only the three departments that expanded their concepts and actions related to sustainability had exposure to an internal change agent and had direct leaders that began engaging in additive behaviours. As a result, we became interested in understanding the change work and efficacy of the internal change agent and departments’ direct leaders. Our first-order analysis reveals a process whereby a department’s expansion of its set of sustainability-related actions is positively influenced by a change agent’s efforts to seed sustainability, which leads to an expansion of concepts related to sustainability. This process appears to be amplified by leader additive behaviours that help translate the new concepts into the potential for tangible sustainability strategies of action. Further, ongoing support actions on the part of the change agent helped translate that potential into successful implementation.

Based on our first-order analysis, we develop a more general theoretical model of how, following the creation of internal change agent roles, internal change agents and direct leaders can facilitate the integration of sustainability into their organization’s culture by theorizing about important mechanisms that may underpin these changes. Our preliminary findings have important implications for research. Our findings highlight the benefits of investigating the interrelations among various actors’ change work in facilitating the integration of sustainability into an organization’s culture. More specifically, our findings provide support for the importance of organizational leaders creating and supporting specific internal change agent roles focused on sustainability. We identify and describe a variety of mechanisms through which internal change agents’ cultural seeding and support behaviours can initiate and sustain sustainability-related culture change. Our findings also contributes to work on issue selling by identifying additional issue selling moves that can be employed by issue sellers with low relative power (e.g. identifying and proposing a range of hypothetical solutions). Finally, our findings contribute to broader work on diffuse, gradual culture change by suggesting how culture change can be driven by individuals with limited power and resources. We conclude our paper by identifying boundary conditions, future research directions, and summarizing our implications for practice.
References


