

# COMMUNICATING AND ENGAGING WITH SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Going forward, senior leaders at post secondary institutions should have the information and insight to help create and communicate a clear sustainable vision and to inspire others to support it.

This is easier said than done.

Although post-secondary staff may strive to improve sustainability, there can be difficulty having the information register with senior leaders. Change is much easier and quicker with strong Senior Leadership support. A lack of formal commitment will slow progress, even though it is still possible, especially with strong student support.

Many individuals are under the impression that sustainability is too costly and will not create a high enough ROI (financial or otherwise) to bother pursuing. It is up to you to create a case that breaks this stigma and shows the long-term value of sustainability, as short-termism may be the most significant barrier to senior level engagement.

To navigate through the sustainability challenges that lie ahead, innovation and adaptability will be needed. Everyone, especially Senior Leadership, must have a better understanding of the problems we face and how we can respond to them. This document aims to support your efforts in reaching the senior leaders at your institution.

## The Prototypical Senior Leader

It is important to understand where senior leaders are coming from, as they have a unique perspective. Generally, he/she/they:

- Formulates and executes overall strategies to produce desired results.
- Is responsible for a large portfolio of initiatives and focuses on the most impactful areas.
- Aligns stakeholders, capabilities, and resources for achieving complex objectives.
- Is a decision maker with significant access to institutional information and resources.
- Has very limited time and multiple competing priorities.
- May have limited capacity for new issues.
- May rely heavily on others for new knowledge and information to help inform effective, strategic decision-making.
- Is positioned to drive actions by setting and committing to a supportive statement concerning sustainability goals.

Presentations are great for visuals and staying organized, but they can feel as if you are talking to people, not with them. Create a dialogue to ensure both parties are contributing. Use a PowerPoint to convey supporting evidence only, including graphs and charts.

If a solution to your situation has been implemented at others institutions, use case studies to show it is possible and that there is a support system.

## Illustrating Sustainability Integration

How can you best engage and support your senior leaders in creating a future that actively contributes to a just and sustainable world? Make sure that when your team interacts with senior leaders, they tell a compelling story that captures attention.

“We are at a historical moment when evidence is telling us so many established practices cannot continue. We are burning carbon beyond our budget and overshooting freshwater supplies so we must work to reduce energy consumption, utility costs, and natural resource dependence. The objective of sustainable integration is to grow the institution in a responsible future facing way.”

Provide evidence which makes them question old habits and do things in different way. That different way is to include sustainability in the overall strategy with an assessment of the impact of energy, water, and materials usage, as well as the impacts on pollution, community, climate, and biodiversity.

By aligning with government priorities we will not only be ‘doing the right thing’ environmentally, but will avoid a potential legal/ compliance risk and stay ahead of changes in legislation. Sustainability reporting has evolved from the uncommon to the expected. Nothing else quite motivates Senior Leadership to undertake an inconvenient problem so much as the prospect of everyone else being ‘in the know’.

We cannot afford to not adapt, and our results will be known. Each report will shine a light on the results. All institutions and corporations alike will be held accountable. Senior leadership may respond well to sustainability performance ratings such as STARS and may be willing to add extra capacity for sustainability progress improvements.

As well, there is business pressure to improve market share as students are increasingly prioritizing sustainability. Improved perception with prospective students will help in an increasingly competitive and global educational marketplace. Students demand responsibly managed education. This should be tied directly to finances, business development, and continued growth. Sustainability efforts improve student, faculty, and staff morale and their desire to contribute to something larger than themselves.

Discuss with other senior leaders, influencers and experts to be sure you are on track. Find out whether there are third rail issues you should avoid until you understand them better. Embrace feedback from people who are ‘in the know’.

Look forward, not back: use relevant metrics to forecast the future, not scrutinize the past. This can be wrapped up with the results of inaction (business as usual). Change can be scary, and sustainability is a big, time sensitive undertaking. Senior leaders may want to know the cost (financial or non-financial) of inaction. This can be a time where utility forecasting can be brought up.

## 5 Steps for Engaging Senior Leadership

### 1. Define and Communicate our Shared Responsibility

In October 2018, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a landmark [special climate report](#): we must transform our economy, industries and institutions urgently or face catastrophic warming.

The panel of leading climate scientists warned that there is only a dozen years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5°C. Even half a degree beyond that will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, and extreme heat.

Rather than dismiss the alarm bell, we must use this warning as a catalyst for historic change. It's time to rapidly transition towards a better future for all, moving beyond the slow incremental approach that has proved to be ineffective.

The Global Warming of 1.5°C Special Report is a goldmine of facts regarding the negative results of inaction and the value of actively reducing damage to our climate.

Leverage student feedback. What do students think? What do they want and why? How will giving them what they want add value? What opportunities can your ask/reason for the meeting be turned into a learning experience for them? Ask them!

### 2. Provide Proof of Ontario's Situation

The Government of Ontario has provided [facts on climate change](#), why we need to address the problem, and how it affects our province. The information provided includes quantitative data realities on how extreme weather, damaged agriculture, diminishing water quality, and rising temperatures have affected Ontario. Use this information to help Senior Leadership understand the local impacts of climate change.

Consult case studies from other Ontario post-secondary institution's sustainability efforts to provide even more material. Keep in mind that that no one solution fits all regions or communities. Your particular location makes your institution unique.

### 3. Propose Solutions

It's time to look forward. Your sustainability team must play the role of the change agent by providing a range of solutions with reasoning. Be prepared with a top choice, which may take in to account the concerns of your particular region. Having a chosen solution based on your experiences and knowledge will help show your ability to make decisions and act as a leader.

Have a full plan in place – potential budgets, staffing commitment, completion dates, requirements and benefits. Prioritize what needs senior leadership engagement and what can be accomplished without their involvement. Go in prepared with what you need from leadership. Ensure you can answer "what do you need from us?" and "how can we help?"

Shift your language towards "de-risking" (benefiting/protecting/improving resilience) of the institution. For example, "There is no money to do this" can be reworded to "How does this support our priorities?" Identify how your solution reduces risk within the institution.

#### 4. What is the call to action/next steps?

Propose next steps that the senior leadership team might take. Avoid phrases such as “have to” or “must.” “We strongly recommend,” or “the most prudent action would be,” is more appropriate for decision makers, as your task is to present a case that sways their decision in your favour based on the facts.

Example: “About 60% of Ontario’s food and organic waste is sent to landfills which emit methane – a potent greenhouse gas – when it decomposes. And according to the [Northern Policy Institute](#), communities in Northern Ontario are generating more on average than our southern counterparts. Our landfills are filling up. In September 2015, Dryden had to close one of its landfill sites, and as a result of receiving an unexpectedly high tonnage of material, the Sault Ste. Marie site now has less than three years left. We have a plan to efficiently divert a fair chunk of our institution’s waste from a landfill. There are ways that our waste can be properly composted, recycled, recovered or disposed.”

Work to incorporate sustainability into the institutions performance management system.

#### 5. Align the Solution and Ask with Strategic Priorities

Institutional priorities change based on funding, provincial and federal governments, and unique risks of the institution. You may have a great solution to an important issue, but if it cannot be communicated in a way that is directly aligned with institutional priorities, it may be ignored.

#### Potential Challenges

- Job turnover from key Senior Leadership sustainability champions. Use this opportunity to make yourself seen when a position is replaced. Let them know sustainability is important to the institution and the students.
- Senior Leadership may not see sustainability as a priority. Ideally, knowing their viewpoints ahead of time would be best. Meet with data supporting sustainability, including student viewpoints. Your Institution’s overall strategy should reflect stakeholder interests.

Articulate your solutions from a financial standpoint and how it relates back to the institution’s visions and values.

#### Conclusion

Ensure that your team continues to regularly engage Senior Leadership on sustainability topics, so that they are up to date and feel involved. Engagement is an ongoing process that requires the creation of a report and mutual understanding of each party’s priorities to provide value. Pay attention to which ideas gain traction and use that observation to strengthen your position.