

Lessons for successful change leadership in implementing Education for the SDGs

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Overview

The 12 key lessons on how to successfully embed the SDGs into universities and colleges which are summarised below have been generated from our research with the 500 successful L&T leaders involved in the 2008 *Learning Leaders in Times of Change* study; the 188 successful Education for Sustainability leaders around the world involved in the 2012 *Turnaround Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education* research and from our recent (2022) replication of the TLSHE research with 200 ESD leaders in Malaysian and Japanese higher education.

These key lessons were implemented when I was PVC and Executive Director of Sustainability at WSU and have helped the University to achieve its number one ranking in the world out of 1400 participating universities in the 2022 Times HE SDG Impact Rankings.

The key integrating themes in all of this research are

- Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas
- Change doesn't just happen but must be led, and deftly

Key overall lesson

- Listen, link, leverage and lead, always in that order.

Specific lessons/tips from these successful ESD change leaders in Higher Education

1. Whenever possible, start with a stocktake to identify what staff are already doing to address the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and bring this together, share and acknowledge it.
2. Develop a ‘why bother?’ case and summarise the successful solutions to addressing this agenda which are already underway elsewhere and test these out with those who are to implement the development as you apply the listen, link, leverage and lead strategy.
3. Engage the senior executive. To do this leverage the university’s mission and ‘moral purpose’, the KPIs of the senior leaders; note the use of the Times HE SDG impact rankings to enhance recruitment and the fact that students are calling for more focus on the SDGs (UNESCO 2018).
4. Argue for the allocation of a supportive senior leader to be responsible for leading a systemic approach to embedding the SDGs into the university’s Learning and Teaching, Research, Engagement activities and its use of the campus as a living laboratory for sustainable development; and set up a network of local A/Deans to implement uniquely suitable solutions as per the process of ‘steered engagement’ (Fullan & Scott, 2009: 85-88).

5. Keep in mind the key tests which staff will be continuously applying when asked to get involved in an SDG initiative: They will be constantly asking is my continued engagement with this change relevant, desirable, clear and most importantly feasible?
6. To engage staff, use both intrinsic motivators (like the moral purposes embedded in the UN SDGs) and extrinsic motivators (like public acknowledgement and awards for successful implementation and quality improvements). Recognise that there is a profound difference between ‘change’ (something becoming different) and ‘progress’ (a value judgement by each individual that this is desirable).
7. Given that change is not an event but a complex learning and unlearning process for all concerned, recognise that, as change leader, you have the role of teacher. Therefore, apply the same quality tests and learning support you provide to students to your staff. This would include provision of learning support which is ‘just-in-time’ and ‘just-for-me’ and access to successful ways to implement the change identified by ‘fellow travellers’ further down the same change (i.e. learning) path elsewhere.
8. Start small and build on your successes. It is more effective, therefore, to go ‘ready’ (we need to try something new), ‘fire’ (try this out under controlled conditions, monitor the results and refine the innovation) and then ‘aim’ (identify what has been shown to work best). This is in preference to a ready, aim, aim, aim approach. Here the key lesson is that we learn what works best by doing it.
9. When taking decisions, focus on consensus around the data not around the table.
10. Seek to ‘meet less but meet better’.
11. Keep in mind that how you act when things go awry during implementation can serve to motivate or disengage staff and that how you behave can act as a model to others on how to manage change productively and positively. Here the key capabilities of successful ESD change leaders provide a framework (Scott et al, 2012).
12. Always listen to resisters – they are an ideal source of information on the challenges that have to be addressed if the change is to be successfully implemented.

References

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