

Summary of discussion: changing organisational behaviours

A Cambridge Zero Policy Forum roundtable discussion
with Cambridgeshire County Council

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Reported by

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Background

The Cambridge Zero Policy Forum is a multidisciplinary community of senior academics contributing evidence and expertise to public policies for the transition to a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient net zero society. Previous reports by the Policy Forum highlighted the importance of behaviour change for achieving net zero, leading the Policy Forum to assemble a panel of academics working in the field. Liaising with Cambridgeshire County Council and the panel of academics, the Policy Forum convened this 1-hour roundtable in November 2022 to explore questions posed by stakeholders at the County Council on changing organisational behaviours, particularly in the context of net zero.

Cambridgeshire County Council recently committed to be net zero as an organisation by 2030 and net zero across Cambridgeshire by 2045, an ambitious target ahead of government legislation. To achieve this requires technical innovation to decarbonise high emitting sectors, as well as an organisation-wide upskilling of employees. This will equip Council workers to communicate the evidence-based climate agenda effectively, both within and outside the organisation. In support of this goal, the County Council is focussing on developing a new people strategy. This people strategy will include the development of a new set of organisational values and behaviours. The County Council recognises that there is the additional challenge of identifying effective mechanisms to enact this change across the organisation.

The County Council's aim is to change the culture of the organisation to become more people focused, more connected as a community, and more compassionate. They plan to achieve this through incremental steps. For example, they are considering how to make employees climate ambassadors and how this might be most impactful. The County Council identified that their 4,500 employees could potentially have a much bigger impact as climate change ambassadors within their wider communities, as well as at work. The climate ambassador role can be viewed as an upskilling opportunity to change employee behaviours.

This roundtable discussion was convened with the aim of identifying useful tools and strategies to facilitate the behavioural and cultural changes necessary for the County Council to reach its ambitious climate targets. Participants sought to address questions including:

- How can Cambridgeshire County Council create organisational change, using people to shift the organisation's behaviour and culture?
- Can the County Council use the ambassador role to empower all staff to lead change and impact the wider community?
- What could trigger behaviour change within the organisation and the wider community?
- What examples of organisational behaviour change can the County Council learn from?
- What theoretical frameworks can be applied within the organisation to encourage a culture shift?

Summary of discussion

Exploring the role of climate ambassadors

An academic participant shared a study in which specific individuals were selected to be ambassadors, rather than all members of an organisation. The study identified that successful ambassadors had three common characteristics:

1. The ability to **create a supportive environment**, where everyone could engage in dialogue.
2. They were **comfortable pushing boundaries** and engaging in challenging conversation with those in positions of authority and power.
3. Ambassadors **were comfortable not knowing** exactly how the actions they championed would result in the desired final outcome, but that they were confident that it would.

It was agreed that being comfortable with uncertainty is not a ubiquitous quality and is difficult to teach. A supportive structure could be put in place to try to enable everyone in an organisation to be more comfortable with change. It was suggested that when designing an ambassador programme, it is important to identify, define and communicate the specific set of competencies and skills required. This manages expectations from both sides, the organisation and the individual. It was suggested that there could be different levels of climate ambassadors, with the core competencies used to guide personal development.

There was a question as to how an ambassador role would differ between changing culture in the workplace versus changing behaviour within the wider community. From the academic side, it was suggested that it could be difficult to think of everything at once. Focusing on embedding the internal behavioural change first followed by the wider community could be more impactful.

Embedding triggers for behaviour change

The County Council has case studies of effective nudges and incentives within the communities they serve. They currently use the COMB-B¹ and MINDSPACE² models for behaviour change, for school to home travel and in adult social care settings. There was agreement that these were still good models to apply.

Identifying individuals' capacity to change

The County Council wanted academic and practitioner insight into mechanisms for triggering organisational behaviour change. Academics emphasised that behaviour change relies significantly on someone's ability and agency to change. Individual behaviours can then be supported by working to remove barriers that specifically affect individuals' ability and agency to change. They explained that it is crucial to raise awareness within the organisation of how individual behaviour change links to organisation-wide change.

¹[A guide of the COM-B model of behaviour \(social-change.co.uk\)](https://social-change.co.uk)

²[MINDSPACE: Influencing behaviour through public policy \(instituteforgovernment.org.uk\)](https://instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

When planning organisation change, academics distinguished technical and behavioural potential. The predicted environmental impact or advantages of a change is its technical potential, whilst behaviour potential is defined as change that is feasible within the organisation.

When considering the feasibility of measures to support organisational behaviour change, it is useful to assess and identify the relevance of infrastructure, existing inequalities and the influencing power of individuals and groups in the organisation that may affect behaviours and decision-making. It was explained that this method can be useful to encourage those with the most influence and agency to assume responsibility and make change.

Embedding environmental choices

The County Council explained that they plan to redesign services in order to minimise the obstacles to making environmentally friendly choices, and to embed environmental action in everything they do. With regards to infrastructure, this involves embedding net zero into the first principles of design. They recognised that work needs to be done to identify who holds the levers for change and who can create the greatest change.

It was agreed that identifying behavioural and structural changes with the highest potential impact is crucial. Behavioural science suggests that some of the most effective interventions are those where the default choice is change. Additionally, ensuring that incentives are put in place to initiate and maintain these changes was highlighted as key during transformational processes. Participants agreed that the identification of these factors can help engage and empower change makers.

Relationship-based systems change work

Senior management

Drawing on practical experience, one participant suggested that the County Council could adopt a looser management style in regard to their behaviour change initiative, as opposed to a strictly controlled top-down approach. A participant identified that a risk of tighter objectives is that it becomes a tick box exercise, rather than a task with deeper purpose. It was explained that a looser management style would allow the knowledge and expertise of teams to shape how the desired outcomes are achieved (i.e. a bottom-up approach). Teams would be given a sense of ownership to define and create change. For example, teams might be empowered to set their own targets. It was suggested that organisational leaders approach change by listening, rather than telling.

The power of senior leadership modelling the desired characteristics was highlighted. For example, it was suggested that senior leaders within the County Council should be optimistic, open and compassionate, to ensure that these behaviours cascade down the organisation structure.

The theory of sensemaking

When applying change initiatives at the organisational level, the capacity for constant learning and the ability to make sense of the new demands, were identified as particularly important during the implementation process. Conceptual frameworks such as the theory of sensemaking ([van der Heijden et al., 2012](#)) offer a useful approach. This framework emphasises that to achieve real

change, people will need to make sense of what the changes mean for their role and their personal motivations. For this to happen, organisations must provide constant guidance and support which reinforces the importance of building a group of change agents or ambassadors of change.

A proactive culture

Another key lesson that was brought to the discussion was acting by doing rather than thinking. Whilst the importance of planning and design were recognised as crucial, one participant highlighted the value of swiftly moving towards a sense of action. Based on some participants' experiences, this can be achieved by:

- Coaching, supporting, and providing space for action.
- Enabling colleagues help create team goals.
- Providing structure for knowledge and ideas to be shared, such as a commitment from senior leaders to listen to ideas from colleagues and to form solutions based on team feedback.

To help maximise impact, academics suggested mapping backwards from the desired behaviour change, and then working out the steps to achieve the end goal.

Incentivising behaviour change

A sense of belonging

Participants agreed that incentives could be a powerful tool for engagement with the new climate agenda across the County Council. However, logistically, pay incentives are not suitable tools for the County Council. Instead, it was agreed that the County Council could set itself apart through its culture, by virtue of how things are done and how people are treated.

Core motivations

It was proposed that it would be worthwhile investing effort to identify core motivations of County Council employees, how these could be leveraged into action. Correctly identifying these core motivations was highlighted to be essential, as there is a risk of backfire if the implementation of change initiatives forces professional identities to change. A participant explained that conflicts between identity and role can lead to cynicism, loss of motivation and high turnover.

In addition, it was noted that people can make changes that benefit the environment while being motivated by other factors. Establishing common ground and finding existing shared values can be useful for driving change. For example, the emotional rewards provided by a specific change can be a very powerful mechanism to achieve and sustain behavioural change.

Another lesson shared by a participant was that when working with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, it is important to carefully manage the incentivisation process. In instances where there is an abrupt elimination of an extrinsic reward, it can eliminate the behaviour and reduce the efficacy of intrinsic motivations.

Lessons from other examples of organisational change

Cambridgeshire County Council's equality and diversity strategy

The County Council previously set a corporate target across the organisation for equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Rather than a top-down approach, the County Council promoted collective learning and sharing of issues and concerns relating to EDI. It was felt that this allowed employees to think in more detail about EDI and how they could engage with the County Council's agenda. The County Council representatives suggested that lessons could be learnt from their experience with EDI to apply to their new net zero agenda. One participant felt that inviting employees to actively engage within their teams and contribute to the establishment of team goals had led to better overall engagement. It was suggested that the Council could include a net zero outcome within the reporting process of each team.

Healthcare messaging

One participant highlighted processes from the healthcare sector. One example shared was a programme of clinical champions in which champions were invited to specific study days to upskill them and were set small challenges and competitions related to their overall goals. Another was a national programme to embed language change to provide consistent messaging and remove judgemental language when discussing specific medical conditions.

Communicating change to stakeholders

Participants discussed potential ways to communicate changes to stakeholders. One model, used in climate communication by Professor Kimberly Nicholas, is a 5-part framework:

1. It's warming
2. It's us
3. We're sure
4. It's bad
5. We can fix it ³

Participants explained how this framework allows people to see where change is possible now. This was deemed especially important because data suggests that the biggest problem currently is not climate deniers but climate delayers⁴ (those that do not agree with the need for urgency).

Participants agreed that it is a huge challenge to communicate to a large, time poor and varied population. Particularly, identifying what message to target and prioritise to maximise engagement. There was agreement that the formation of feedback loops within the organisation would provide insights to improve and better plan future communication. For example, feedback from climate ambassadors could better inform future ambassador training.

There was consensus that finding a balance between **hope** and **severity** in messaging about climate change is challenging. However, by finding a balance between promoting action with authority, whilst allowing for uncertainty, and also creating space for two-way communication, the participants agreed

³ <https://www.kimnicholas.com/climate-science-101.html>

⁴ Lamb, W., Mattioli, G., Levi, S., Roberts, J., Capstick, S., Creutzig, F., . . . Steinberger, J. (2020). Discourses of climate delay. *Global Sustainability*, 3, E17. [doi:10.1017/sus.2020.13](https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.13)

that collective learning would be possible. This could then lead to a collective understanding of the climate issue and facilitate action within the organisation.

Measuring behaviour change

The roundtable concluded on a reflection of how best to measure behaviour change across the organisation and in the wider community. One suggestion was to solicit feedback on impacts and successes, and to measure this feedback. Another participant emphasised that it was important to identify target behaviours associated with the desired values, and to express them in a manner that can be periodically measured. Surveys, such as pulse surveys, were suggested, as a means to measure the self-view and the others-view of the organisational behaviour. For all measurements of behaviour change, it was agreed that the establishment of a baseline was important.

Conclusion

Following the fruitful discussions on effective ambassador roles and behaviour change, participants also identified areas for further investigation, including identifying the agency particular to various communities.

Participants

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