

Sustainable leadership: how to put people at the heart of the green economy

How do you build a business that is positive for people, the planet, society and the economy? Maria Chenoweth, chief executive of second-hand clothing charity TRAIID, offers her top tips



THE GREAT WORK RESET

**Sustainable leadership:
people, planet, profit**

Maria Chenoweth, CEO, TRAIID

 The People Space
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Transcription

I think TRAIID is a really good example of an organisation that creates green jobs from people's waste. So our business model is 130 staff. Each day they're working to collect people's unwanted clothes to sell them, our international projects and retailing, and making second-hand clothes really joyful. So that shows that you can have a business model that provides the jobs that support the green economy. But beyond that, for other businesses and organisations, there are things that people can do, and organisations can do.

So for example, if you want to support a green economy, look at your suppliers. Who do you bank with? If you bank with the bank that is supporting renewable energy, then you're supporting green jobs and the green economy. If you're buying your sundries and products from more environmental organisations, then again, you're supporting better jobs than the job that provides bleach and the environmentally damaging product.

How do you bring sustainability to life at TRAIID?

So at TRAIID we have a policy that at all our staff socials it's vegan food that's provided. Some people may turn vegan from that and some people not. And we try to find locally sourced businesses, which is nice, and it really brings staff together. It doesn't matter if you're a meat eater or not. It makes people feel good within that moment. So there's lots of policies that can be introduced.

And listening to your staff as well. So people's values are changing. I've never seen everything so divided. There are a lot more arguments to be had – eg whether people should be flying for business or not flying. Because we're being given so much information, because the environment and sustainability is so important and at the fore, we allow staff to bring in their values. The vegan idea came from a staff member. So it is very important to listen to your staff and integrate into the organisation other people's ideas.

And I think another point that I would like to make is there are so many organisations outside your own organisation that have so much information and it's really important to go outside. So for example, the Living Wage Foundation. They've done all the research. They've done all the work. They know what it takes for one of your employees to live and fill their food basket, pay their rent. That saves so much time for an organisation. Then you can make the decision whether to implement that or not. There's Rainforest Action Network. They have so much information and really good information on who the best people are to bank with. So, listen to your staff and their values, but also go outside and listen to the grassroots movements.

What role should leaders and HR professionals play in enabling an organisation to become sustainable?

Leadership is very complex. I've been working on that at the moment with The Open University, and I don't think there's any true definition. There are millions of books have been written. But I think COVID did show that there is an expectation of leaders and they really couldn't fulfil that role. So, for example, at the moment staff want to know when are we going back? Are we going back full

time? What's happening with my job? And for the first time ever, I haven't been able to give an answer. So I've had to say, my narrative is now, for the first time in my life, I can't give you an answer. That makes me feel like a failure. We'll just have to play it week by week. So COVID has definitely thrown up some challenges in relation to leadership and leading an organisation.

In regard to leadership and sustainability and the environment, I'm quite an angry person underneath my exterior. I'm angry in the sense of how businesses have been left to cause so much damage. I'm fed so much information on a daily basis. Sad information, bad information, how our clothes are made. It's not nice. So I guess what's hard for me is to balance being a leader of TRAIID and an organisation that is a very nice organisation and my personal views of wanting to shout from the rooftops about how damaging businesses are. So that, I think, that's my tough balance as a leader.

There are lots of organisations out there that do measure businesses' metrics. My thought process is going to the place of why are we measuring something that's already there? That's already doing bad things? Some obviously are measured on their good things, but in general industries are bad, aren't they? So I had this sort of theory or notion that let people decide if they want new products made. So a bit like the concept of the citizens assemblies for politics, why can't we have the business citizens assembly? Because this impacts people so much – it impacts you and I – I think people should be integrated in the decision-making process of how products are made. So that's my new thinking for the moment. It's probably not unique. It's probably been thought of before. Before the metrics of measuring a business, or measuring something, I think there should be the question should it be produced in the first instance?

So my HR manager is currently doing his training, getting his qualifications, and he started as a sales assistant. He's probably been with us about 15 years. He understands what it's like to do most of the jobs in the organisation. So before we didn't have a HR manager, so now it's a nice luxury. So the senior management team - we're going to go through the organisation just to make sure that all our supply chains are the best that they can be. And then it will be the HR manager's job to write the policy, check that it's legal and then distribute the information to the staff, the reasoning why and ensure that it happens. So that's where HR comes in. And, also, I'll ask him to get feedback from the staff as well, to see if there's anything we can be doing better because also they'll be talking to our customers. So that's one aspect and again the training is very important. So why we do what we do? So we can start working on looking at our training and making sure people understand why and our staff understand why we do what we do.

What are your top three tips to help organisations become more sustainable?

I think if I was to give any tips on what's been very useful for TRAIID and my organisation it's go outside. There are loads of incredible organisations, social movements, who have so much knowledge, it's their life's work and it will save your organisation a lot of time. So go outside your organisation is, I think, one of the most important things – and bring information back in for you to make decisions.

I would also say don't stay static because within my organisation we have longevity. People stay – the average length of service for a senior manager is 13.5 years. So it's really important. We could just carry on blindly but you can't stay static. You have to challenge everything that you're doing. And again, go through your supply chains, how you do stuff, what can you change? What can be changed for the better? Being more sustainable in the long-term and the short-term can actually be more profitable and better for your bottom line.

And I think my third piece of advice would be let staff input some of their values into the organisation because that's a great contribution and that's a great feel-good factor. So somehow then you'll have to form a mechanism of listening to your staff. They can then start influencing how the organisation lives and breathes.

Maria Chenoweth is the executive of TRAIID, a UK charity working to tackle the negative socio-environmental impacts of production, consumption and waste in the fashion industry and visiting fellow at the [Research into Employment, Empowerment and Futures \(REEF\)](#) academic centre of excellence in The Open University Business School, where she is innovative module content on transition to a green economy. You can find out more about her inspiring personal journey from academic underachiever to CEO and MBA alumnus [here](#). This interview is part of the [Great Work Reset](#) series created by The People Space in partnership with The Open University Business School