

ENGAGE YOUR DEEPLY COMMITTED EMPLOYEES TO DRIVE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE INSIDE

– THE "RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM" AT METRO AG

<https://doi.org/10.29180/ISSUEI.21.1>

*Silvia DAMME and Marina SCHMITZ
(CBS International Business School)*



Concerned SDGs: 4, 8, 9, 12
Company name: METRO AG
Industry: Food- & Hospitality



We need action for Sustainability – How do we make it happen?“

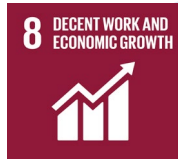


Companies increasingly recognizing their responsibilities within the societies and environments they operate in. Changing company culture and long-established practices and operations are a challenging task on the way to implementing measures that drive more sustainable business effectively and successfully.

“We want to see a culture of sustainable business – What does that require?“ Next to an ambitious vision and clear targets for **implementing a successful CSR strategy** from the company’s executive leaders, it is important to **engage your employees** on this journey towards change. Companies need to recognize the potential and value their employees can have on the way towards more sustainable business practices and find a way to **leverage employee potential into a snowball reaction of cultural change towards sustainability**



The METRO Leadership Program educates promising young leaders to overcome external and internal barriers in order to tap into their full potential. It shows an innovative intensive training approach aiming to accelerate sustainable and responsible company culture and operations.



The program works towards more responsible leadership which will impact a better working environment and culture. Through implemented sustainability projects and innovation development the company aims to secure future-fit operations.



METRO encourages young leaders to implement their own innovative projects within the organization. Their work develops industry operations forward and drives sustainability and innovation.



As a retailer METRO has a strong lever to advance more responsible production and consumption patterns. The program is specifically designed to accelerate the implementation of sustainability practices and to bring about improvements for society and the environment directly influenced by the organization.

“We want leaders to take action – How do we identify the right leaders to take action?“

Another issue for employers is to attract new talents. A future-fit business model and a sustainable reputation can help companies in the battle for young talents. Additionally, it is important for employers to **keep their employees satisfied and motivated** in order to generate high employee retention.

In order to on the one hand attract and keep employees and in addition find a way to engage them effectively to drive your company strategy and culture internally, companies need to find ways to actively motivate and develop high-potential employees. Therefore, they need to identify *whom* those change-makers and drivers of CSR would be and how to **engage and support them to take action**.

ENGAGE YOUR DEEPLY COMMITTED EMPLOYEES TO DRIVE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE INSIDE – THE "RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM" AT METRO AG



We need action for Sustainability – How do we make it happen?"

This METRO best practice example sketches out a program that manages to **combine employee development (HR sector) with driving sustainability** within a company in an innovative way. The **METRO Sustainable Leadership Program (MSLP)** boosts sustainability across METRO, with a focus on organizational change and on building a community of sustainability leaders.

It shows how a company can support and foster the development of responsible leaders within the company and link it to concrete projects within the organization. This way approaches **employee engagement, leadership development and sustainable business practices in an integrated manner** to drive a responsible leadership approach:

“

“In the end, it is people who change the world and shape our society, governments and business. Thus, to METRO, sustainability is foremost an attitude and a way of working towards common goals (...) Principles are of high value, but we do not stop after establishing them. We understand that it is our responsibility to enable our people to live up to our principles: Running a sustainable business cannot be done without strong leadership.”
(Global Goals Yearbook, p.139)

”

ENGAGE YOUR DEEPLY COMMITTED EMPLOYEES TO DRIVE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE INSIDE

– THE "RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM" AT METRO AG



Implementation & Practice of the METRO Sustainable Leadership Program

The **choice of applicants** proved to be of utmost importance to program success. During program development, it became clear that the goal is to find engaged and enthusiastic young middle-management leaders within the company that would have the power to lead and inspire others. Through this, a snowball reaction can develop within divisions and ultimately the company. Julia Jürgens, program leader of the Responsible Leadership Program stresses: **“It’s about characters that feel intrinsically motivated to engage for a higher goal – not only for their own career. These are the leaders ...we need.”**

She explains, that people can be divided into the following categories:

- 01** THE CAMPAIGNERS & THE OPTIMISTITS
(DEEPLY) COMITED
- 02** THE CONFUSED & THE FOLLOWERS
UNDECIDED OR PARTIALLY COMMITTED
- 03** THE UNWILLING
ACCEPT THE ISSUE, BUT NOT PREAPRED TO ACT
- 04** THE REJECTERS
ACTIVELY REJECT BOTH THE ISSUE AND TAKING ACTION



METRO’s strategy is to recruit „**Campaigners & Optimists,**“ in order to develop their leadership skills. Then those will set off to engage and inspire the „**Confused & the Followers**“. This way, the company states it can **seed sustainability efforts and mindsets throughout the company** most effectively in order to create a culture of sustainable business.

The program itself builds on the following components:



ENGAGE YOUR DEEPLY COMMITTED EMPLOYEES TO DRIVE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE INSIDE

– THE "RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM" AT METRO AG



Implementation & Practice of the METRO Sustainable Leadership Program

Sustainability Projects

Each participant applies with a project idea they want to bring to life during their participation in the 1.5 year-long program and beyond. These projects can then act as starting points within a certain division or location and promoted as internal best practices, e.g. on green store concepts, vegetable (re-)packaging or women empowerment. The aim is to spread successful projects on a larger scale, as well as to inspire others to come up with their own project ideas. According to Julia Jürgens, participants are encouraged to think beyond the status-quo: "The sustainability projects that participants develop and carry out are not only run from within our business, and are consistent with our business – they usually have a direct positive impact on costs, processes, employees, customers or suppliers as well: a business case."

Personal Leadership

The program further aims to develop leadership skills in its participants and has them go through an intense process of self-reflection and personal development. Julia Jürgens states: "In a large corporation, driving change for long term goals is no minor endeavour – it requires strong leadership "This is done through one-on-one as well as peer coaching, especially during a weeklong "leadership journey" into nature the participants of each cohort take together. In order to make their projects a success, it is important to not only assist with providing resources like time and money, but also to guide participants through personal roadblocks and set believes that might hinder them to unfold their full potential.

Community

Each participant applies with a project idea they want to bring to life during their participation in the 1.5 year-long program and beyond. These projects can then act as starting points within a certain division or location and promoted as internal best practices, e.g. on green store concepts, vegetable (re-)packaging or women empowerment. The aim is to spread successful projects on a larger scale, as well as to inspire others to come up with their own project ideas. According to Julia Jürgens, participants are encouraged to think beyond the status-quo: "The sustainability projects that participants develop and carry out are not only run from within our business, and are consistent with our business – they usually have a direct positive impact on costs, processes, employees, customers or suppliers as well: a business case."

ENGAGE YOUR DEEPLY COMMITTED EMPLOYEES TO DRIVE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE INSIDE

– THE "RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM" AT METRO AG



Resources, Obstacles & Benefits

Management support is pivotal when it comes to programs like this. Executive level needs to foster and encourage awareness of the program and CSR. The participants need their projects supported and they need the freedom and resources to follow through on implementing their ideas. They need the time within their working hours to spend on their projects. Moreover, **financing** of projects is necessary for them to tackle their respective tasks. Further, the participants need **qualified mentors and coaches** to support them on their journey. This way, it is not only ensured that they get operational support, but also to make sure the necessary leadership skills and personal growth can develop.

Within a large corporation, there will always be colleagues and leaders not as driven by the sustainability agenda as others. Acceptance of projects within the company might not always be easily attainable. One **cannot mandate a change in company culture** and operations. The “unwilling” and the “rejecters” have to be dealt with at one point or the other. However, the Responsible Leadership Program provides **an innovative approach towards leadership development in combination with matters of sustainability and responsibility.**

Resources provided may not always match the amount of time and money actually needed by program participants. However, the program can function as a best practice example and inspire others to follow a similar approach. It acts as a good example of how companies can driver cultural change towards more responsible and sustainable practices from within a company by leveraging and developing their **employees’ leadership potential.** The METRO program shows how the company can engage and motivate employees and hence drive their engagement and productivity within the company. It acts as **driver for innovation and sustainability within the organization.**

Personal growth of key employees as responsible leaders is achieved and employees develop a growth mind-set of “transforming challenges into opportunities”. Support of key leaders with the potential to inspire other employees within the organization can be used to accelerate change in company culture organically and heightens the chance for successful change processes. Compared to the **company size** however, only a small number of employees are able to participate in the program. Number of applications always outnumber the actual spaces available by the program as of now.

Additionally to internal effects, the communities that METROs operations affect can benefits through a more sustainable company strategy. They might directly benefit from company projects or profit indirectly through a more responsible business practice of the company. If the CSR understanding of the company grows, the chance rises that outside stakeholders such as communities affected by their operations will be listened to and engaged with more. Moreover, the program specifically aims to “bring out improvements for society and the planet that are within the circle of influence of our business,” says Julia Jürgens.



Sources

- ❑ Global Goals Yearbook: Sustainability Drives Our Purpose. p.138-141. 2018.
- ❑ J. Jürgens: Encourage Develop and Award Responsible Leadership. Presentation at the 8th International Conference of Sustainability and Responsibility. 2018.
- ❑ J.Jürgens: Responsible Leadership in Times of Transformation. In: SustainAbility in Supply Chain Podcast by Vaishali Baid. May 2019. <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/anchor-podcasts/vaishali-baid/e/60894021>
- ❑ J.Jürgens: Out in Nature: Bringing Leadership to another Level – The METRO Sustainable Leadership Program 2019. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/out-nature-bringing-leadership-another-level-metro-program-julia/>
- ❑ Metro AG: Corporate Responsibility Report. 2018. <https://reports.metroag.de/corporate-responsibility-report/2017-2018/>
- ❑ Biester, S.: Nachhaltigkeit als Führungsthema. Lebensmittelzeitung. 2018. <https://www.lebensmittelzeitung.net/handel/Metro-AG-Nachhaltigkeit-als-Fuehrungsthema--135207>