

# CAST BRIEFING 23 - February 2024



## How can you change sustainability behaviours in your workplace?

### Key messages:

- **Employees are more likely to adopt pro-environmental behaviours at work if they think that the organisation has strong 'green' values.**
- **There are broadly two categories of employee pro-environmental behaviours.** One category (proximal) is easy to perform and can be encouraged by proactive managers but has less impact on the environmental emissions of the company. The other category (distal) requires more effort from employees but can lead to larger contributions to the organisation's environmental targets. Businesses can encourage these behaviours by creating enabling contexts.
- **Organisations can get easy wins through proximal behaviours, like recycling office paper.** Getting managers to support their employees and make clear that they value pro-environmental behaviour is a good place to start.
- **Distal behaviours (such as changing wider processes to affect energy use) require support at a higher organisational level,** with organisational values and the employee's commitment to the organisation being important. Creating these organisational values can be done through clear communication from leadership as well as incentives and social cues that employees are 'green' at the organisation.



Centre for **Climate Change**  
and **Social Transformations**

CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change. Based at the University of Bath, our additional core partners are Cardiff University, the University of East Anglia, the University of York, the University of Manchester and the charity Climate Outreach.

# Introduction

This briefing is a resource for businesses and organisations of any size that want to help employees be more sustainable at work. The research shows that change at the top and organisational level can enable pro-environmental behaviours throughout the workforce.

Organisations are coming under increasing pressure to transition towards net zero, among other environmental sustainability targets<sup>1</sup>. While there is much uncertainty around the transition to environmental sustainability<sup>2</sup>, organisations are recognising the potential for competitive advantage, client and customer demand, financial investments, and most importantly, future talent acquisition and retention<sup>2,3</sup>. There is a trend of employees demanding more action from employers<sup>4</sup>.

Norms and behaviours within organisations are an important part of meeting net zero targets. Organisations can better deliver emission reductions by encouraging change in their employees' behaviours. This research looks into how organisations can meet these demands as well as motivate employees to take action at work.

CAST carried out research with 450 employees across a variety of organisations. This research attempted to understand how pro-environmental behaviours at work can be categorised in order to better target interventions to encourage these behaviours.

Firstly, this research built upon the most recent understanding of pro-environmental behaviours at work<sup>5</sup>, which were separated into two categories: 'proximal' and 'distal' (see Table 1). Proximal is individual-focused, immediate, and simpler to achieve (e.g. recycling paper at work). In contrast, distal behaviours are long-term and complex and need collaboration among employees (e.g. implementing new work processes that would reduce energy consumption). Distal behaviours will transform practices throughout an organisation on a larger scale, contributing more substantially to organisational environmental goals.

Employees will be more likely to engage with any type of behaviour, but particularly distal ones, if they believe it will be 'worth it'. Employers should ensure that they create a context within their organisation where employees believe their suggestions will be listened to and acted upon.

# Findings

	Proximal	Distal
Difficulty	Simple	Complex
Who is involved	Completed individually	Requires collaboration
Time horizon	Short-term	Long-term
Certainty	Certainty regarding outcome	Uncertainty regarding outcome

*Table 1: Characteristics of proximal and distal pro-environmental behaviours*

Secondly, this research found that supportive supervisors, a typically consistent measure of positive employee behaviour<sup>6</sup>, helped to encourage proximal behaviour change but not distal. Due to the complexity of this behavioural category and action taking longer to come about (for example waiting for a new policy or changes in norms of the workplace), they would require more employee buy-in to the goals of the organisation and a more enabling organisational environment, rather than just from their immediate supervisor. Both the commitment of the employee and the level of support which they felt they received from their organisation were key predictors of distal behaviours – but not proximal behaviours.

Thirdly, the research demonstrated the importance of ‘green’ organisational values. When participants perceived their organisation not to be concerned with environmental issues, they were much less likely to behave in a pro-environmental way<sup>7,8</sup>. If an employee perceives their organisation to have strong ‘green’ organisational values, they will be more likely to perform pro-environmental behaviours at work. This follows the theory of normative conduct<sup>8</sup>: other people can influence our own behaviour, by showing what a new ‘normal’ looks like<sup>9</sup>. This is especially important if the more immediate colleagues of the department or group in the organisation also perform these behaviours.

# Recommendations

- **Simpler 'proximal' behaviours are easier to bring about than more complex 'distal' ones.** Motivations are different and distal behaviours require a more supportive and enabling organisational context.
- **An organisational culture focused on sustainability is important in shifting employee behaviour, particularly towards distal behaviours.** Other research undertaken by The Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) found that this also positively influences how employees see their organisation.<sup>3</sup>
- **More significant behaviour change needs support to visibly come from higher up in the organisation than just one's immediate manager.** This can be done through various human resource strategies (appraisals, hiring focus, communications, highlighting best practices etc.), as well as C-suite leadership that shows this is something the organisation cares about.
- **It is not just the values that are important, but also the behaviours of other employees.** If an employee observes their colleagues behaving in pro-environmental ways, this has a strong influence on them to similarly follow suit. Therefore, enabling motivated employees and supporting their efforts will lead to more employees copying these behaviours and shifting behavioural norms in the workplace.



# Further reading

## References/Further reading:

- <sup>1</sup>Skidmore, C. (2019) UK becomes first major economy to pass net zero emissions law, Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-first-major-economy-to-pass-net-zero-emissions-law>
- <sup>2</sup>Cleveland, S., Sullivan, K., Poole, V., Chahed, Y. (n.d.), 'Overcoming the hurdles to integrating sustainability into business strategy' Available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/insights/environmental-social-governance/integrating-sustainability-into-business-strategy.html>
- <sup>3</sup>Tregaskis, O., Graham, J., Baric, M., Harvey, V., Maguire, D., Michaelides, G., Nayani, R. & Watson, D., 30 Aug 2023, Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development in Organizations. Di Fabio, A. & Cooper, C. (eds.). Routledge, (Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development in Organizations).
- <sup>4</sup>Steinmann, J., Alsegaf, K., Pankratz, D., Novak, D., Kujur, N. (n.d), 'Engaged employees are asking their leaders to take climate action'. Available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/insights/environmental-social-governance/importance-of-sustainability-to-employees.html>
- <sup>5</sup>Francoeur, V. et al. (2021) 'The Measurement of Green Workplace Behaviors: A Systematic Review', *Organization & Environment*, 34(1), pp. 18–42. doi: 10.1177/1086026619837125.
- <sup>6</sup>Graves, L. M., Sarkis, J. and Zhu, Q. (2013) 'How transformational leadership and employee motivation combine to predict employee proenvironmental behaviors in China', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 35, pp. 81–91. doi: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2013.05.002.
- <sup>7</sup>Dumont, J., Shen, J., Deng, X. (2017) 'Effects of Green HRM Practices on Employee Workplace Green Behavior: The Role of Psychological Green Climate and Employee Green Values', *Human Resource Management*, 56, pp. 613–627. doi: 10.1002/hrm.21792.
- <sup>8</sup>Cialdini, R. B. and Jacobson, R. P. (2021) 'Influences of social norms on climate change-related behaviors', *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 42, pp. 1–8. doi: 10.1016/J.COBEHA.2021.01.005.
- <sup>9</sup>Norton, T. A., Zacher, H. and Ashkanasy, N. M. (2014) 'Organisational sustainability policies and employee green behaviour: The mediating role of work climate perceptions', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 38, pp. 49–54. doi: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2013.12.008

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# CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change.

We research and develop the social transformations needed to produce a low-carbon and sustainable society; at the core of our work is a fundamental question of enormous social significance: How can we as a society live differently – and better – in ways that meet the urgent need for rapid and far-reaching emission reductions?

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