



# Do you have what it takes?

*What does it take to be a great sustainability champion? Penny Walker looks at some different approaches to assessing and improving our professional impact*

Some are born great, some achieve greatness and others have greatness thrust upon them. I am comforted by the idea that we can develop our leadership skills – we don't have to settle for what we were born with – and curious to find out what we need to achieve greatness as sustainability leaders, since that role has been thrust upon us by circumstance.

When I was putting together the Change Management practitioner (Volume 8), I looked around for checklists which readers could use to identify their strengths and weaknesses. I found ways that people could assess their knowledge, attitude and footprint (Table 1).

**Table 1: Checklists and self-assessments**

<b>Knowledge</b>	IEMA Associate Membership Criteria <a href="http://www.iema.net/membership/individual/associate">www.iema.net/membership/individual/associate</a>
<b>Attitude</b>	How 'green' are you? BBC / Open University quiz. <a href="http://www.iema.net/env/107/10">www.iema.net/env/107/10</a>
<b>Footprint</b>	<a href="http://www.myfootprint.org">www.myfootprint.org</a>

Together, these self-assessments help you to get a picture of yourself as a sustainability champion, albeit light on the social aspects of sustainability and the 'soft skills' of a change maker.

**“Getting a view from colleagues is even better, because it illuminates both our facades and our blind spots”**

And there are other clues: for example, the learning objectives for the Masters in Sustainability Leadership, run out of Cambridge University's Programme for Sustainability Leadership, include theories of change as they relate to sustainability, applying approaches like strategic thinking and scenario planning, being able to work across silos and sectors, and being able to 'sell' sustainability-related ideas.

There's a table of skills and abilities in the Change Management practitioner (p9) which draws together many of these ideas.

**To see ourselves as others see us**

Burns was spot on: a view from the outside 'would from many a blunder free us'. Self-assessment is a good start, but getting a view from colleagues is even better, because it illuminates both our facades (those things we hide from others) and our blind spots (which others can see, but we can't).

**Table 2: Luft and Ingham's Johari window**

	Known to self	Not known to self
Known to others	Arena	Blind spot
Not known to others	Facade	Unknown

And if you're recruiting, promoting or developing sustainability leaders, then you'll want to gather a wider set of views through a more rigorous assessment.

I heard about a new one recently, and found out more. It was developed following interviews with sustainability practitioners and others about what makes a great sustainability leader, and has been trialled with around 500 people. Called Leadership for a Sustainable Future, this is a 360° assessment tool. You'll probably be familiar with the 360° feedback concept: the idea that, when looking at someone's performance at work, you don't just ask the line manager but also their colleagues, peers, reports, even customers or other people they interact with outside the organisation.

This tool incorporates that idea, so that you can see what impact you are having on the people you are trying to influence. The report picks out your hidden strengths as well as your blind spots, as identified by the people you work with.

I tried out the questionnaire for myself. The questions are straightforward, rather than devious which made some of them paradoxically very hard to answer. For example, I like to think I "communicate complexity so it is easy to understand", but the ultimate test is whether the people I'm communicating with understand my message, so their view is crucial. The 360° aspect of the tool makes it easy to seek and incorporate these external perspectives.

### The difference that makes the difference

As I go through the questions, I'm more interested in the qualities and behaviours which this questionnaire focuses on. I asked David Collins of Future Conversations, one of the originators of the tool, about those important features.

"What's interesting are the key factors which emerged from our research. When we asked people about great sustainability leaders, the number one important feature was passion for sustainability, closely followed by business acumen."

"Great leaders," says David, "can turn sustainability into a significant business opportunity. On top of that, they have high levels of emotional intelligence, they are strong communicators and can inspire others. It's a 'grown up' model of leadership."

It is taken for granted that leaders are "great at their job", so technical knowledge is important. David says "without this

base how could they hope to influence real organisational change?" But perhaps even more crucial is the ability to influence organisational vision, strategy, culture and structure.

The questionnaire contains around half a dozen questions focusing on behaviours relating to each of the five qualities (Table 3).

**"Great sustainability leaders - the number one important feature was passion for sustainability, closely followed by business acumen"**

**Table 3: Qualities and Competencies, Leadership for a Sustainable Future**

Quality	Competencies
Vision for a sustainable future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commitment to sustainability</li> <li>Visionary</li> <li>Strategic</li> </ul>
Positive leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing change</li> <li>Organising for success</li> <li>Passionate communication</li> </ul>
Business action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commercial focus</li> <li>Drive and tenacity</li> </ul>
Empowering relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Richly relating</li> <li>Credible influence</li> </ul>
Personal responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenge and enquiry</li> <li>Integrity</li> </ul>

### Asking the question makes a difference

The act of undertaking an assessment of this kind can by itself catalyse change. David says, "Also as one of our users has commented, at a group or organisational level answering the questions contained in the tool helps to encourage new 'norms' of desired behaviour." If you know that the assessment is interested in how well you link sustainability to strategy, or how constructively you challenge

current practice, then you will pay more attention to those aspects.

### You know the score, what next?

When you have a better idea of your strengths and weaknesses, you can take action to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. Pay particular attention to those areas which were a surprise in the feedback from others: what are you better at than you think? What have you been fooling yourself about?


Training courses, books, action learning and coaching are all ways of developing your abilities.

If you have gone through this process with colleagues, then take action together too, supporting each other's efforts to improve and giving positive feedback when you see each other trying out the new behaviours.

I'd be interested to hear about other assessment tools, and will add them to a list on my blog if you let me know about them. ■

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*'Leadership for a Sustainable Future', developed by Future Conversations and Talent Innovations, www.iema.net/env/107/7  
Change Management for Sustainable Development: a workbook, IEMA, 2006, www.iema.net/env/107/8  
Johari Window  
www.iema.net/env/107/9*



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