

To Train or not to Train – that is the question...

“If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Often misattributed to quotesman extraordinaire Mark Twain, the original quote is from Abraham Kaplan in 1964 and says, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”

Popularised by Abraham Maslow in 1966 and now widely known as law of the instrument or Maslow's hammer, the saying describes our tendency to rely too much on familiar tools.

Even training, the favourite tool in my environment and sustainability toolbox, is not always the solution to an identified performance problem, and this explains why trainers put so much emphasis on training needs assessment (TNA).

The question of whether workplace-based environment and sustainability training is the solution to the problem first comes up at a very high level TNA:

- yes, every organisation – be it business, government or nonprofit – needs to play an active role in accelerating the transition to a decarbonized economy in which people and the environment really count; and
- no, not every organisation will need to formally train all its staff to help them play their role in this exciting transition –
- but every sector will need trained people to help roll out the changes in workplace practice that will get us there.

How does that all fit together?

I've been working out a simple matrix to help organisations work out if environment and sustainability training is the right tool for them – and if not, what other tools in the toolbox they will need to use – because, yes, that's right folks – we won't all need “training” – but we will all most definitely need to use some of the many other tools in the environment and sustainability toolbox.

But first – exactly what is training? People use a lot of vague terms, so in my book (reference below) I define training as:

“the acquisition of work-related knowledge, skills and practices that will improve a specified aspect of on-the-job performance in observable and/or measurable ways as defined by clear and achievable performance standards and/or outcomes. A core principle is that of fairness: people need to know exactly what is expected of them, and this is especially true in a regulatory context”.

To work out when training is needed and who needs training, I find Charles Handy's analysis of companies' management errors applies equally to deficits in environment and sustainability management:

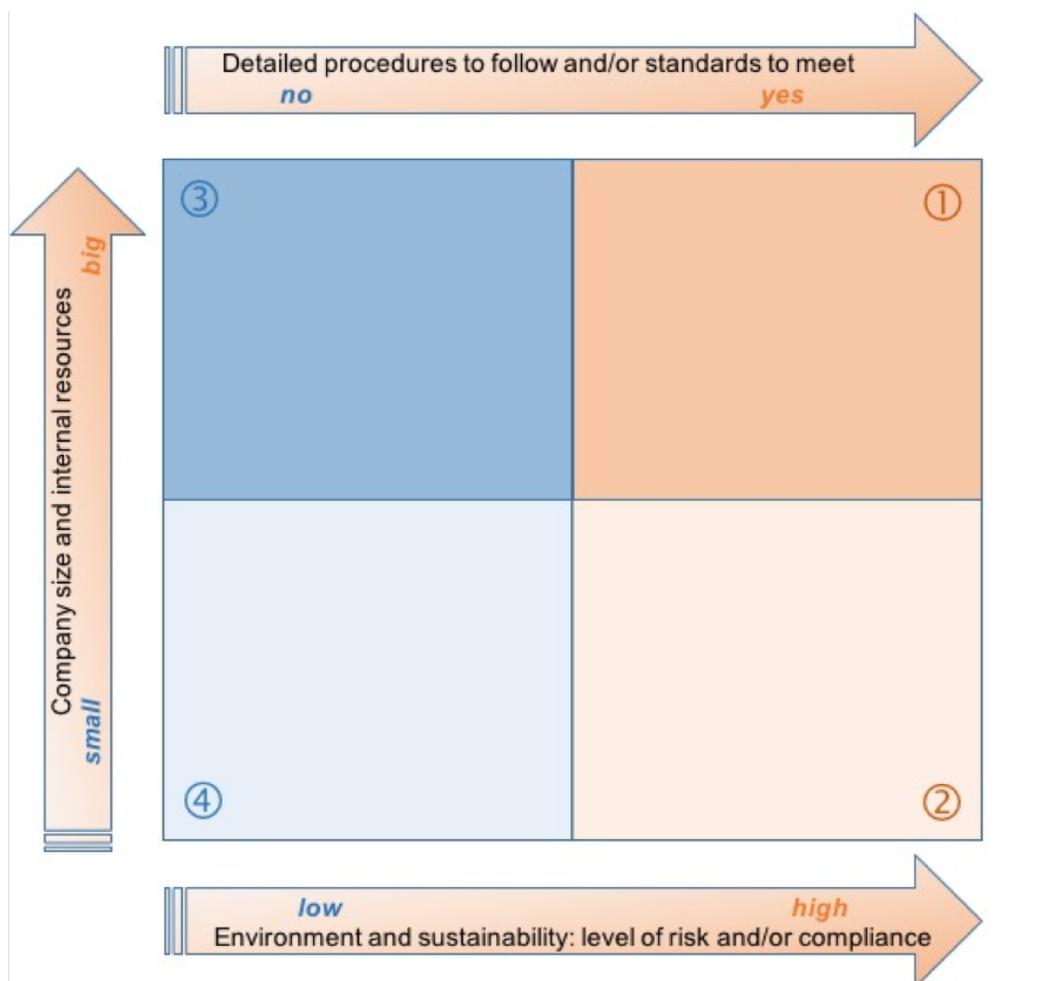
- Type 1 errors, where we can get it wrong, e.g. illegal discharges to water, soil or air– these tend to be a focus for organisations working in a high risk/strong environmental compliance context
- Type 2 errors, where we don't get it as right as we could, e.g. carbon intensity. These tend to be more of a focus in a lower compliance context – except that of course, climate change poses a very high risk to all of us, so we need to start getting this very right as of right now, well before any regulation comes in!

Overleaf is a first draft of my thinking about where formal environment and sustainability training is needed.



Clare Feeney is a sustainability strategist who helps organisations of all types grow their sustainability capability. She can help you grow jobs, increase profits and improve the environment – and have fun along the way! You can find out more at www.clarefeeney.com and contact her at clare@clarefeeney.com.

Where in the matrix would you plot your organisation's training needs?



① Organisation's staff training need

- ✓ mix of internal and external training is very likely needed, with good internal performance support, especially if there is a range of aspects and impacts
- ✓ cross-sector support for/input to training is highly desirable, to help train staff of small organisations

② Organisation's staff training need

- ✓ internal staff training is very likely needed, especially if training topics are diverse
- ✓ some specialist external training may also be needed
- ✓ cross-sector co-ordination of training is highly desirable

③ Sector staff training need

- ✓ professional/trade association staff develop training for staff of big organisations on sector-specific aspects & impacts
- ✓ they then help the staff of these organisations to roll out internal action programs in which formal training is not needed

④ Sector staff training need

- ✓ professional/trade association staff need training on sector-specific aspects & impacts
- ✓ these staff support small organisations to prioritise and implement actions where formal training is not needed e.g. in reducing solid waste and water and energy use



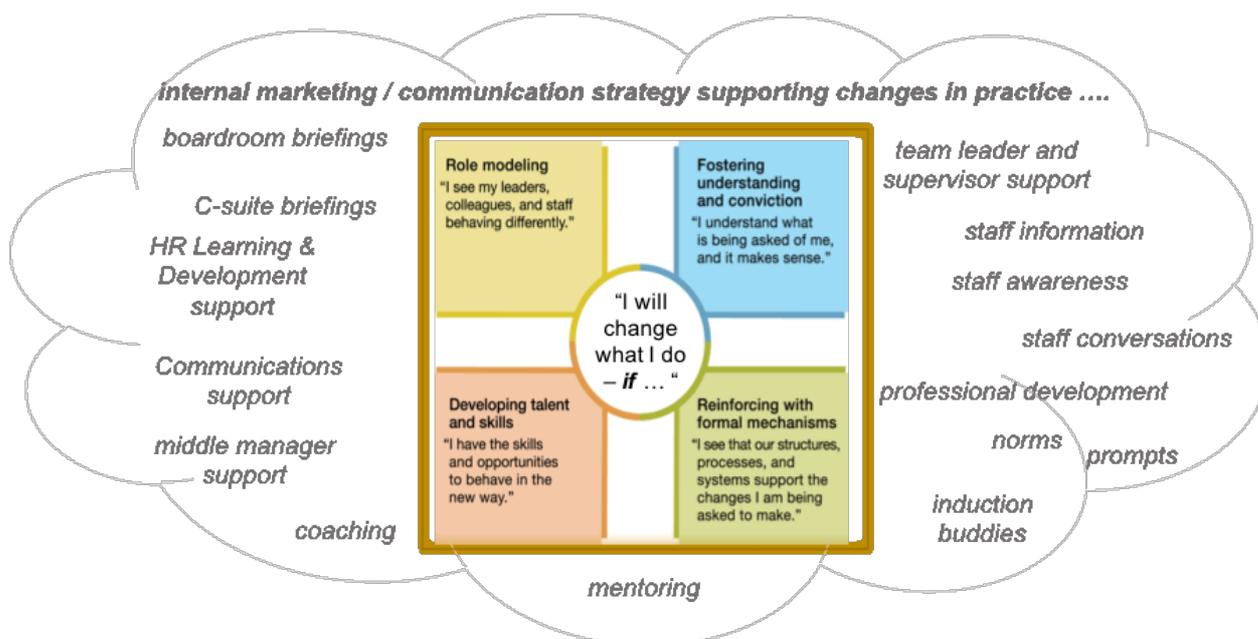
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Questions to consider when you are plotting your organisation's training needs in the matrix include:

- Do you work in a sector where your environment and/or sustainability performance comes under a compliance regime? Consider things like risk management, company reporting, internal and/or external audits and/or certifications, regulatory inspections.
- Are your local or overseas supply chains exposed to socially and environmentally sensitive sourcing of labour and materials?
- Does your operation have a high exposure to financial risk around carbon pricing?
- Is your organisation big enough to have its own Human Resources/Learning and Development team? If not, then consider your firm to be a "small" company
- Do you have specialist environment and sustainability staff who can deliver training to other people in the company who need it? If so, you are probably in or towards the right-hand quadrants.
- Do you rely on environment and sustainability training being provided through other agencies such as industry or professional/trade associations, tertiary or vocational training institutions, third party certifiers or government environmental bodies for training? If so, you are probably in or towards the left-hand quadrants.
- Can the problem be solved by a solution other than training? Examples include automated energy-saving lighting systems and other supportive infrastructure.
- Are you a government or vocational training body, or a nonprofit? If so, classify yourselves according to your environment and sustainability aspects and impacts, for example from your offices, transport and operational activities.

Regardless of whether formal staff training is needed, we all need to use the other tools in the environment and sustainability toolbox to make sure we address Type 2 as well as Type 1 errors.

The diagram below, adapted from a very useful paper by McKinsey, shows just some of the tools we can use and approaches we can take to help our organisation and our sector become more sustainable.



Overleaf are more tips and a list of references



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Looking at the matrix and the diagram, ask yourself:

- What internal training are you already delivering and what external training are your staff attending?
- Where do your organisation's training needs fit in the matrix?
- What other tools from the environment and sustainability communications toolbox are you using to support the training you're doing in house, or to support the development and delivery of training for your sector as a whole?
- What internal or external performance standards or benchmarks are you using to support your organisation's environment and sustainability initiatives?
- What other tools like ISO standards or other third party verification systems and supports are you using?
- How will this analysis influence what you do next?

Carrying out this kind of analysis will help you decide which tools to use on your part of our shared journey to a more equitable and sustainable world.

Links and references

- "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." Abraham Kaplan (1964). The Conduct of Enquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co. p. 28. Find out more about "the law of the instrument" at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_the_instrument
- Clare Feeney (2013) How to Change the World: a practical guide to successful environmental training programs. Global Professional Publishing (now Stylus). See <http://www.clarefeeney.com/products/for-sale/>
- Tessa Basford and Bill Schaninger (2016) Four building blocks of change. McKinsey Quarterly April 2016. Read the article and see the diagram at <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-four-building-blocks--of-change?cid=other-eml-alt-mkq-mck-oth-1607>
- Niki Harre (2011) Psychology for a better world: strategies to inspire sustainability. Free pdf and \$15 paperback and other resources available from <https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-staff/academic-staff/niki-harre/psychologyforabetterworld.html>.
- Charles Handy (1998) Beyond Certainty: The changing worlds of organizations. Harvard Business Review Press.



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