

CEDEP Voices: Sustainability explores the ideas, insights, and leadership shaping the future of sustainable business. Through conversations with industry pioneers, business leaders and CEDEP alumni, the series examines how organizations can move beyond compliance to create lasting value for their stakeholders, their business, and society.

In this edition, Magali Anderson, former Chief Sustainability and Innovation Officer at Holcim, one of the world's largest building materials companies, joins CEDEP Program Director Arnaud Blandin to discuss what it really takes to turn sustainability into measurable value — and why the leaders who treat it as compliance are missing the point entirely.

CEDEP VOICES: SUSTAINABILITY

**From Compliance to Value Creation: Magali Anderson
on Leading Sustainability as a Business Strategy.**

— Magali Anderson, former Chief Sustainability and Innovation Officer at Holcim



How did you translate sustainability from a « responsibility topic » into measurable value creation?

First of all, you have to look at it from a business perspective. In my case, that was helped by my background. I had run P&Ls and worked across several functions, so I had a good understanding of how companies work. And, very importantly, I was at the executive committee. The CFO and the heads of the different functions are your peers. They cannot simply disregard you. Sustainability becomes embedded in all the conversations such as strategy discussions or investment decisions.

So I did not approach sustainability with the idea that I had to implement a lot of things because it was « sustainability. » I approached it from the point of view of the business. What is the state of the business? What can we do? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

In cement, there is a huge reputation problem. Nobody likes cement. People see it as damaging nature. So the narrative had to shift from «cement is horrible» to «cement is a necessary evil.» And once you accept that, the next question is: how do you make that evil less evil?

I was not trying to sell sustainability as such. I was trying to show that if you want to continue recruiting talent, if you want people to keep buying from you, then you need to change your image and your trajectory.

But narrative is not enough. Everything has to be based on science. The first thing I did was bring together around 60 to 70 very technical people from all departments in a workshop to answer one central question: is there a way for us to get to net zero or not? We worked on it exactly like a business strategy — how do you decarbonize cement, what are the technical levers, how much does it cost, can you finance it, can you sell it, can you make money from it?

To convince the executive committee, I also started from the bottom and moved up. I contacted the N-2s of executive committee members, ran mini-workshops with country CEOs, and shared drafts of the strategy so they felt they had contributed. All of that took time. I started as CSIO on 1 October, we did the workshop in January and I got approval from the executive committee in July. It sounds like a long time — but I knew I only had one chance. If you present something and get a no, it is almost impossible to come back. So I did all the background work to maximize the chances of getting it approved the first time. It is real strategy work, but it is also politics. You have to be an internal lobbyist.

What had to change first: the mindset, the operational systems, or the leadership posture? And where did you underestimate the difficulty?

When I look at sustainability, I always distinguish between what is impactful and what you do for engagement, to change the company mindset. Both are very important, but you have to treat them differently.

What is truly impactful often only concerns a handful of people. If I take the case of cement, replacing fossil fuels with waste in cement plants will be done by the plant technical teams under the direction of the industrial managers. It is a small number of people compared with the size of the whole company. But if you want to create momentum, you also need to involve people who are not directly part of the technical transformation.

An example of an «engagement» action is something we created called «Office Goes Green» which is about eliminating plastic bottles, pushing for electric vehicles, circular economy actions in an office environment. For a company like ours, that was insignificant from an overall impact point of view. But it allowed every employee to feel part of the journey.

Prioritization is absolutely key. I deliberately did not launch Office Goes Green too early, because I wanted one hundred percent of the focus on the net-zero pledge first. Every other initiative can become

a distraction, or worse, an excuse for doing nothing material. The best way to lose credibility: constantly coming with ideas, even good ones, that are marginal in the context of the company.

On the question of difficulty, I would not say I underestimated it. On the contrary, I assumed from the start that it would be hard. That is exactly why I took so long before bringing the net-zero pledge forward. I wanted to make sure it would stand up to scrutiny.

Today we see ESG backlash, regulatory overload, and economic slowdown. Why is it dangerous to treat sustainability as a compliance topic?

If you go back to the definition of sustainability, it is about doing more with less. Making more money with fewer resources. If that is not aligned with financial rewards, then you have to explain to me what is.

The CO2 emissions of your company are linked to resources you have paid for. Everything you do to reduce them is going to be good for your bottom line. Doing the same with fewer resources. It really is as simple as that.

It also means moving from products to services. If tomorrow you came up with a business model where you guarantee washing machines that last 20 years, people would buy them. In the real world, it would mean having a leasing system, which would make all companies invest R&D into making sure the washing machines last longer. Because the longer they last, the more money you make. In other words, you have managed to decouple revenue and CO2 emissions.

What do you think CEDEP's Sustainable Value Creation program offers current and future leaders?

Most sustainability leaders do not need another course on frameworks. They need help turning sustainability into business priorities, internal alignment, and measurable value creation. What I like about this program is that it is built for that reality: prioritization, credibility, execution, and follow-through.

About the CEDEP Sustainable Value Creation program.

The Sustainable Value Creation Program is CEDEP's newest leadership development experience, designed for leaders who need to turn sustainability pressure into business value, stakeholder influence and practical action.

Participants bring a real challenge from their organization and work on it throughout the journey. They learn to integrate business and sustainability through one lens, reframe complex issues, speak the language of stakeholders, and translate sustainability into financial value, innovation, and long-term competitiveness. Combining peer learning, systems thinking, AI-enabled analysis, financial framing and responsible leadership, the program equips participants to move beyond compliance and reporting toward sustainable value creation.



CEDEP is a not-for-profit executive education club that empowers leaders to navigate an ever-changing business world and shape organizations for more sustainable and positive impact. In collaboration with our global ecosystem of members, clients, faculty, and industry experts, we co-design transformational leadership development programs that provide a unique space to challenge conventions, collaborate, and succeed together.

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