

Teaching Life's Principles to Grassroots Sustainability Leaders

Alameda County, CA

Application of Nature's Lessons

Background

In order to reach Alameda County's broad 9000-person employee base, an enthusiastic pilot group of 25 employees from 10 divisions were trained in opportunities to be green at work. They shared these opportunities with colleagues during the course of their regular work and through focused campaigns every other month. This was a 6-month pilot program Teaching Life's Principles to Grassroots Sustainability Leaders within a large government organization. We included training on biomimicry, lessons from nature, and applied Life's Principles, which represent overarching patterns found amongst the species surviving and thriving on Earth.

Goal: Be Locally Attuned

- To create a network of role models and sustainability educators who have a framework and a platform to promote green workplace choices effectively and measure their impact.
- The County is a diverse workplace with jobs from social services to public works to law enforcement, so we need to attune sustainability messages to the specific context.

Applying Life's Principles to Campaigns

- Life's principles were integrated as tools to help Ambassadors design the overall campaign framework and then tailor the specifics to their departments.
- To do this, the Green Ambassadors looked at organisms that model life's principles to see how to incorporate them into the campaigns to make the campaigns more effective.
- They would look at a champion species, such as the narwhal with its sensitive tusk that gives it feedback about its environment, and ask questions like, "How can we design a campaign with short, frequent feedback loops?"

Self-Organizing Networks

- The Green Ambassadors considered how they could encourage individuals to self-organize.
- For example, they asked how could their colleagues take actions that benefit themselves and also contribute to the "smart printing" campaign by reducing printing. One idea was to give prizes like Starbucks cards through the contest to those who share the best tips for smart printing – so they can go out for coffee with a colleague and spread the word. Another approach was to collect tips from their colleagues rather than just telling them how to print less, then loop back and share those with others so the group was creating its own content.
- The Green Ambassadors developed rules for self-organizing their own communication, such as sharing "ah-ha" moments on regular check-in calls.



Green Ambassadors are locally attuned to the needs of their department.



Green Ambassadors designed the campaigns to be adjusted based on feedback from participants and the environment.



The network members looked to natural champions, such as the narwhal, for inspiration. | Image credit: TBD



Green Ambassadors design the campaign to encourage individuals to self-organize.

Results

Participants Found Biomimicry Engaging

- A Green Ambassador noted that biomimicry focus at workshops "stretched the way I think about problem-solving."

Recycled Content Office Supplies Campaign

- Over 1600 employees were challenged to try a new product and see that there are great recycled content options.

Smart Printing Campaign

- 145 people attended interactive smart printing workshops that Green Ambassadors hosted.
- An online contest demonstrated that a case of paper can be saved each time 60 people think before printing.

Clean Commuting Campaign

- At least third of the Clean Commute Fair attendees came because a Green Ambassador personally invited them.
- The agencies with more Green Ambassadors won the competition in their categories.



Recycled content office supply photo contest winner



Smart Printing Campaign poster



Green Ambassadors and colleagues visit bike repair stand at Clean Commute Fair.

Lessons Learned

Effective Grassroots Approach

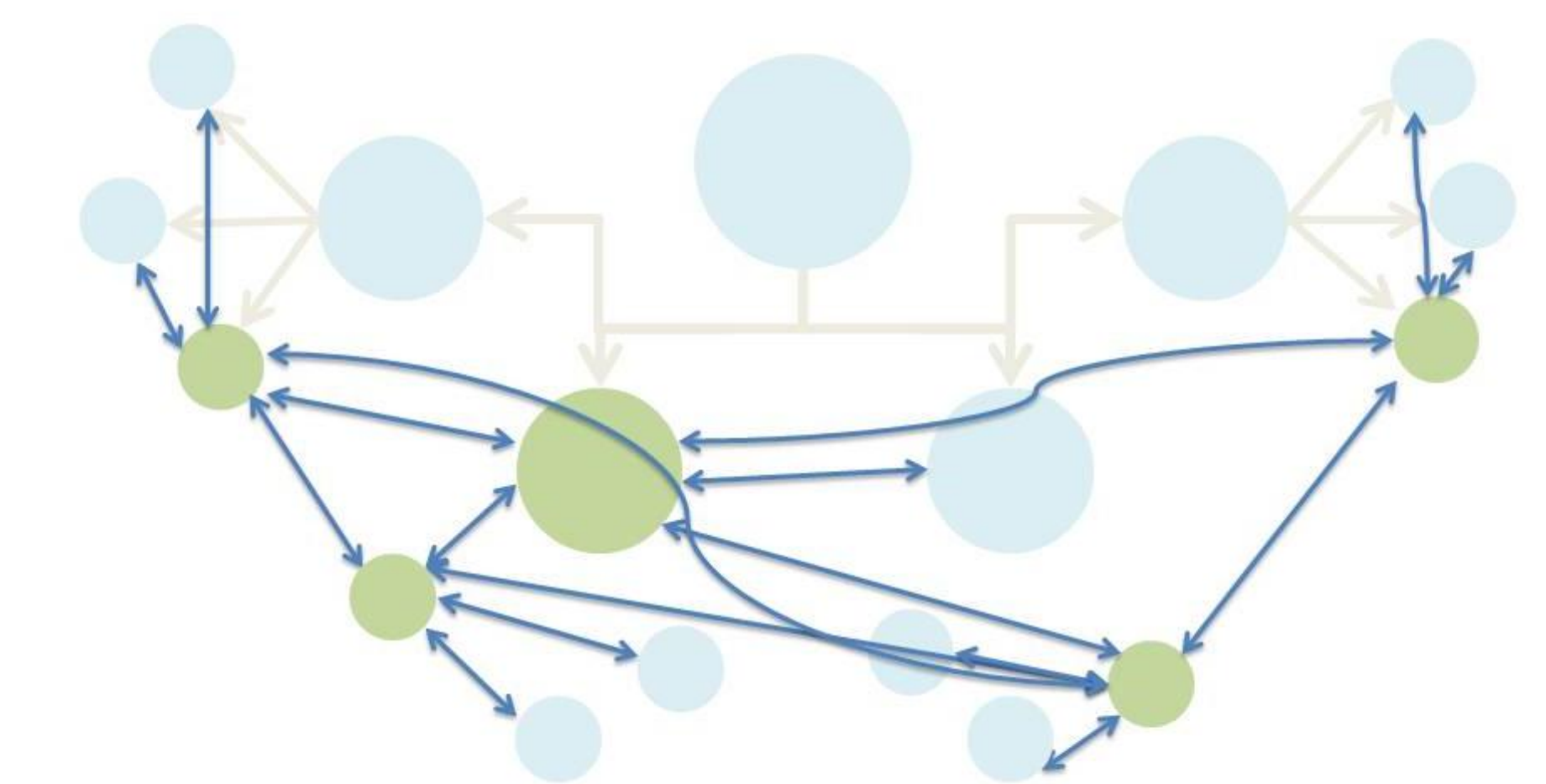
- Program changed the "pitch" of communications to be heard through the "noise" of emails. It achieved targeted behavior changes, and employees enjoyed participating.
- Green Ambassadors appreciated connecting with like-minded people and creating a buzz.
- Green Ambassadors would like to build a larger network so they can make even more change in their departments.

Structural Changes to Support Ambassadors

- Move to quarterly campaigns instead of bimonthly to accommodate work schedules.
- Increase support from executives and directors to pair department-wide goals with grassroots effort.

Lessons on Employing Biomimicry

- Learning from nature is very engaging, so allow more time for training in the biomimicry approach and include time outdoors.
- Spend more time upfront to develop internal communications infrastructure so Green Ambassadors can self-organize into teams or support networks.
- Explore how species make sure signals can be received by matching antenna to ensure campaign participants receive more feedback on how their efforts make a difference.



The network of peer educators interacts across the formal organization.



As ambient noise from city traffic has increased, the white-crowned sparrow has altered the pitch of its song to be audible above the din. | Image credit: Anders Illum

For more information, contact
Emily Sadigh or
acsustain@acgov.org.

