

Creating and Implementing an Environmental Action Plan

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 11/14/2007

Increasingly, individuals are making a concerted effort to change their lifestyles to decrease their “carbon footprint,” and the pressure on industry to follow suit has never been greater. Whatever industry you are in, your customers and other key stakeholders will want to know what you are doing to meet your environmental responsibilities.

This checklist is aimed at small business owners or senior managers tasked with managing these issues. It explains how to draw up a targeted environmental action plan and then make sure it is implemented effectively.

What You Need to Know

What information does an environmental action plan incorporate?

The purpose of compiling an environmental action plan is to help your organization monitor and improve its commitment to minimizing adverse impact on the natural world. To be most effective, the plan should pull together key elements such as:

- any existing environmental policy statements
- information from environmental audits (see below)
- an explanation of acknowledged environmental management systems and standards, including ISO 14001: Environmental Management Systems
- organizational targets, and an indication of how you will measure performance against them
- lists of responsibilities and the individual staff or teams who are in charge of setting them in train

What are the benefits of creating an action plan?

As noted above, there has never been more interest in, or concern about the environment and the impact that both individuals and industries are having on it. Creating an action plan will demonstrate to all your stakeholders (including customers and investors) that your organization has recognized that reducing environmental damage is a priority. Going through the process of creating a plan will also:

- help you highlight any potential risks and take steps to manage them;

- show your staff exactly what is expected of them as part of their everyday jobs and also what is to be done in an emergency;
- explain how waste and excessive costs can be avoided.

What to Do

Make Sure Senior Management Support the Initiative

If you are responsible for making sure that the environmental action plan is created, start off by making sure that your own managers are fully aware of why you are undertaking this project, and that that they will support you. Explain the benefits clearly and also clarify the implications of their not pursuing this wholeheartedly. Not only might there be negative PR coverage, other stakeholders (such as suppliers and customers) may take a dim view.

Once you know that the top team is behind you, it may be worth appointing a manager to the project who is responsible for its day to day running. If, on the other hand, you run your own business, it would make more sense for you to head up the project: not only will it show to your employees that you are taking this seriously, on a more prosaic level, you may not have a member of staff to spare if your team is a lean one!

Be Aware of the Relevant Legislation

As part of your preparation, contact the EPA to find out about the relevant best practice and legislation for your industry. As a general rule, liability usually means that the polluter pays. The EPA has a useful section on its Web site for this legal information—visit www.epa.gov/epahome/lawregs.htm

It may also be worth investigating registering for ISO 14001, an international environmental management standard which offers a framework for organizations wanting to curb their impact on the natural world, comply with appropriate laws, and maintain high standards on both counts. In some industries, being ISO 14001-registered may give you an advantage over your competitors, as it is a way of demonstrating your commitment to this issue. For more information, visit www.bsiamericas.com

Commission an Environmental Audit

The next step is to find out what type of environmental impact your organization is having. An environmental audit will do just that by providing your organization with detailed, meaningful information upon which you can base future plans and decisions.

These audits can take many forms, and can be as general or specific as you wish: for example, if you know that in your industry too much water is being wasted, you may want to focus purely on that issue. Basic audits investigate a range of environmental factors on site, flagging up areas of potential concern or where further investigation may be needed. They will look at how your business may impact on the immediate local area (for example, do emissions reach local housing? Are nearby rivers polluted?) and how waste and drainage are managed. The audit will also look inside your business premises to focus on office space, food preparation areas, workshops, production lines and so on. Auditors would look at how the premises are heated, ventilated, and lit, and whether there are any water or air emissions. You may be asked to provide a plan of your business's premises to help the auditors point out potential future flashpoints.

Create Your Policy

Based on the detailed and comprehensive information you've gathered from the steps above, it's now time to boil it all down into a full, clear policy. As noted above, this should state plainly your objectives, suggested routes to improvement, point people for liaising with internal and external customers, audit information, compliance with standards, and your vision for how your organization should work with its local community.

You will also need to explain how you will monitor any damage caused by your organization, whether in terms of pollution caused by emissions from factories or old-fashioned equipment, damage in the retrieval of raw materials, or excess waste.

Finally, once the overall policy is complete, compile a procedures manual that explains who is responsible for the implementation of the policy within the organization.

Monitor and Celebrate Progress

Remember that once the audit is done and new programs are implemented, you still have work to do. In fact, this is just the beginning. It's essential that you monitor progress closely, adjusting strategies if you need to, and making sure that you are achieving your goals. It may be worth repeating the audit at regular intervals (every two years, say), so that you can be quickly alerted to any adverse trends.

When you have a success, tell your internal and external audiences, explaining (as far as possible) the financial benefits of your new environmental program. For example, if your overhead costs are

down as a result of your staff using less electricity, tell people. If you have recycled enough paper to save x thousand trees, spread the word. It's also great PR if you can report a positive benefit for your local community. If emissions are down, everyone will welcome that news.

What to Avoid

You Think Your Organization Doesn't Have to Worry About Environmental Issues

While manufacturing businesses are more likely to cause pollution, every single company can make a contribution. Encourage your staff to recycle packaging and paper, for example, and ask them to turn off lights and computer screens at the end of the day. There is plenty you can do to make a difference (and potentially make some cost savings along the way).

You Create an Action Plan Only Because You've Had Some Bad Publicity

It is, of course, impossible to foresee every possible accident or potential error, but taking some time now to create an action plan will mean that you can act quickly if such an event should occur. Staff will be clear about their responsibilities and next steps, and you will be able to get things under control much more smoothly. Don't wait until something goes wrong before you put your environmental action plan together: having extra publicity on top of a problem is the last thing you need.

You Don't Alert Your Staff to the Action Plan

There is no point putting in many hours researching and compiling your action plan if you don't tell your employees about it. You'll only succeed if they are completely clear about the organization's goals and how their roles will contribute to them. As soon as the action plan is ready, hold a company briefing to explain the key messages, answer any questions, and encourage commitment. Make sure a company is e-mailed to staff, uploaded onto your intranet or simply placed in visible areas so that everyone is aware of how seriously you are taking this. As far as your budget allows, invest in training so that everyone gets into the habit of considering the environmental impact of their activities. When you meet targets, tell your staff and congratulate them on their efforts.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

National Council for Science and the Environment: www.cnie.org

U.S. Department of Energy Office of Environmental Management (EM): www.em.doe.gov

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov

Copyright © 2007 CNET Networks, Inc. All Rights Reserved.