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Getting Top Level Commitment

Wendi Wheeler – Sustainability Strategy Manager at Scotland’s Railway



Treading the path of an Energy Manager can often be quite lonely – a lot of the time you are working really hard, digging around in data, walking sites observing with a clipboard or rummaging in boiler rooms, and others in your organisation are never quite sure what it is that you actually do! Then, when you have found efficiency solutions, persuading the powers-that-be to release the funds and give you the backing that you need to put them into action can be mighty difficult. It often feels like you are wading through treacle. You and I know that this work is interesting, rewarding and very worthwhile, but just how do you get

the people that matter to see it in the same way? And who are ‘the people that matter’?

For me, one of the paradoxes of this career is a love/hate relationship with finance. Cost efficiency is not the reason I am in this job – there are much bigger drivers for me (and I suspect for many of you) like doing my small bit to try and slow the Earth’s demise. But, as they say, money makes the world go round, so that is where we need to start. Persuasion tactics to loosen purse strings gain more traction, in my experience, than pulling on heartstrings – more is the pity. **Target No.1 = Finance Director.**

Bundling efficiency opportunities into a cohesive programme of work is a good way to start. Why? Because it makes the numbers bigger, and therefore makes your Finance Director sit up and listen. Pushing forward individual schemes as they become mature is a decent enough way to do things, but it does not set up that light-bulb moment (pardon the pun) that you need to get good backing. Instead, present your full set of ideas in one big bang. This will, of course, mean more work at the outset to quantify all of your opportunities, but

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it is well worth the up-front effort. As well as cost savings, do not forget to consider future cost avoidance for energy, taxation and maintenance costs; and work those into your business case.

Whilst you are preparing for that, you will need some allies on side. Who they are will depend on your organisation and where you are placed within it; but wherever you sit, you will need the resolute support of your own Director. **Target No.2 = Departmental Head.**

Talk to your direct line manager about your plans and the support that you need. They should do the work to open up some doors for you. If not, ask for a meeting with your Departmental Head directly. Present the plans that you are working on, explain the business case and ask for their sponsorship.

If your business case is robust, you should get it. Your Departmental Head will be your ally as you try to gain that top-level commitment that you need. Foster that relationship, maintain regular updates and mentoring sessions, and gain their trust that you can deliver what you are presenting. Enthuse. Explain. Persist. Persuade.

Ok, so you have your Departmental Head on board, and they will do some of the legwork with your Finance Director to gain you an audience. Know your figures inside out, be honest about any bits you do not have the answer to (but make sure you fill those gaps quickly) and have confidence in your work. Enthuse. Explain. Persist. Persuade.

My top tip is to find a way to clearly show your business case with simple imagery that is easy for a non-energy professional to understand. They do not need the detail (although it needs to be available to back up your case) – they want quick facts and figures that do not confuse and are easy to say ‘yes’ to. And spend the time making them look good. If you are not a whizz on Excel or PowerPoint, call in a favour from somebody who is – it will reap massive rewards. Enthuse. Explain. Persist. Persuade.

So hopefully you will now have the backing of your Departmental Head and your Finance Director. But top-level commitment means more than just a slap on the back from your big

boss and a budget (although believe me, these are always much-needed and well-received). What you need is real, firm commitment from your Executive Leadership Team and a rippling communication of it through your organisation, right? **Target No.3 = Executive Team.**

By now you have tested your pitch on your direct line manager, your Head of Department and your Finance Director and, if you are smart, you have honed your messaging as you have gone along. You will also have backing and support in the Boardroom from the latter two. The last thing to do is to sell your concept to the entire Executive Leadership Team. Sounds daunting, but in reality, all that you have got to do is to find a hook for each of those around the table – what will pique their differing interests? A part of your pitch should play to each of them – for your Finance Director, it is money; for your HR Director, it may be the fact that it is proven that staff are happier (and therefore more productive) in a sustainably-aware organisation; for your Chief Marketing or Communications Officer it is likely to be the opportunity to shout about the company’s green credentials; and for your CEO and Chairman it will be the carrot of being a leader in the sustainability field. There are many other examples, but you get the idea. Enthuse. Explain. Persist. Persuade.

Throughout, use the golden rule of ‘present a case that cannot be argued with’. Test your theories and pitches on willing subjects who are not part of the energy management world and will not really know what it is that

you are banging on about. If you sell it to them, and they understand, you are on to a winner. Enthuse. Explain. Persist. Persuade.

Once you have that commitment, your job is not done. You need to maintain momentum. Regularly update your Executive Team, feedback your progress, celebrate your successes and escalate your barriers. Enthuse. Explain. Persist. Persuade.

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Finally, remember – nobody ever went into energy management to win a popularity contest. You need to be prepared to make a nuisance of yourself, and maybe take a knock-back or two. It is no mistake that one of the words I have repeated throughout my musings here is ‘persist’.

It is my belief that one of the most important key skills for a successful energy manager is stakeholder engagement. Tenacity is a must and persuasion tactics need to be on top form. Enthuse. Explain. Persist. Persuade.

And succeed.

Author’s Profile:

Wendi Wheeler is Sustainability Strategy Manager at Scotland’s Railway, focussing on decarbonisation and the low-emissions agenda. She has worked in energy management for 30 years and has won numerous awards for her work. Previously Chair of the Energy Managers Association, she remains a Fellow of the EMA and a stalwart supporter of its work.

**Eur Ing John Mulholland
BScTech (Hons) CEng CSci
MChemE FEI – Director at
Mulholland Energy**



To make things happen in organisations we all know the importance of top management commitment. But in the realm of energy management and behaviour change projects, how do you secure this commitment? How does it work if you are an external consultant?

Who exactly is ‘top management’?

This might seem such an obvious question that it is not worth asking. Top management are those at the top of the organisational tree. While that is true, we need to consider how different sized organisations work in practice. For example, some large multi-nationals have board members spread around the world and they operate at a strategic level and have relatively little involvement in day-to-day operational activities which are delegated to others. Generally, energy management rests under environmental/sustainability and tends to be related to on-the-ground activities. In these sort of organisations people at senior operational level might be the people you need to influence.

How do you access top management?

This can be challenging but you could simply ask to see them. It may be for 15 minutes to explain the initiative and seek their support. Some people do not get in front of top management because they do not ask. They assume the answer will be ‘No’. In hierarchical organisations the expectation is to go via the management tiers. I remember once asking an Energy Manager to introduce me to his CEO. The Energy Manager said he had never met the CEO; it was not possible for me to see him. He was wrong. When we got before the CEO I said: “Thanks for seeing us. I would like to introduce you to your Energy Manager, as I understood you have not met”.

One advantage of being a consultant is that you are from the outside and not in the hierarchy, so you do not have norms to adapt to. In fact, you are an agent of change and part of your role is to challenge cultural norms. You can take risks that internal staff cannot. You can ask big. They can only say no. They might say yes. Napoleon said: “You honour me with the size of your request”.

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Also, as an outsider your views are likely to be taken more seriously than those of an insider, even though the insider might be making exactly the same points. “A prophet is not without

honour, except in his own country”. This provides you with a lever and opportunity and as a consultant it is important to take hold of this function and not shrink back from opportunity.

How do you get their commitment?

It is important to fully understand top managements’ goals and priorities. These will include reducing costs, compliance, health and safety, net zero and sustainability. So, any energy management initiative should be framed within their business objectives and priorities. Then it becomes their priority. It is vital for you as a consultant to link your initiative to their agenda.

Once you have accessed senior management, it is important to ask for their commitment. This means explaining specifically what you want them to do and why.

Around 30 years ago when I was embarking on behaviour change programmes, I was designing an energy awareness initiative. I asked to see the CEO and Board and was given a 15-minute slot. The CEO introduced me to those present and asked: “What specifically are you asking of us as a Board?” At that point I froze. I did not have an answer. I knew we needed top level commitment, but I had no idea what it actually was. I had no specific requests to make. I was unprepared.

So, it is important to define what top level commitment means and specifically what you want people to do. Because senior management are busy people, your requests of them should be framed by:



- Actions with a high visibility and impact.
- Actions which take little time.
- Actions which tie into business goals/priorities.

What to do if commitment is lacking?

The first question is whether commitment is lacking or they are simply busy with urgent priorities to address? It may not be lack of commitment but a timing issue. Therefore, it is important to be patient and seize opportunities when they arise.

Sometimes commitment is actually lacking by some senior people. In this case it is helpful to analyse why. It could be a lack of awareness which you could address. But if it is a lack of interest or engagement then it is worth asking:

- What will get their attention?

- Is there anyone at a senior level who is interested?
- What is the minimum commitment we need to get the initiative going?

Sometimes commitment grows as initiatives succeed and senior people then want to be associated with success. In other words, they can have a change of attitude.

At the other end of the spectrum if top level commitment is not forthcoming and their support is needed there is the option to walk away and to do anything at all. I have done so several times and focused my efforts on clients who want to engage. Time is now running out on the climate emergency and if senior management are sleep walking, it is time to go to those who are awake.

If the commitment is there, how do you sustain it?

The important thing is feedback,

communication and maintaining a personal relationship. This can be done by a variety of ways. For example, in one organisation the Board had monthly meetings and I gave a 15-minute update once a quarter. It was sufficient to brief them on successes and challenges. Often senior level people will volunteer to help: "If there is an issue, let me know." These senior people can unblock problems and also contribute useful ideas.

Author's Profile:

Eur Ing John Mulholland is a chartered energy consultant with over 40 years' experience in energy management and behaviour change. John is qualified ESOS Lead Assessor and is experienced in energy auditing and ISO 50001. He founded Mulholland Energy Solutions in 2012 and specialises in behaviour change, employee engagement, ISO 50001 and energy and carbon management and strategy.