



**Beyond unconscious  
greenwashing: Empowering  
authentic sustainability  
through employee behavior**

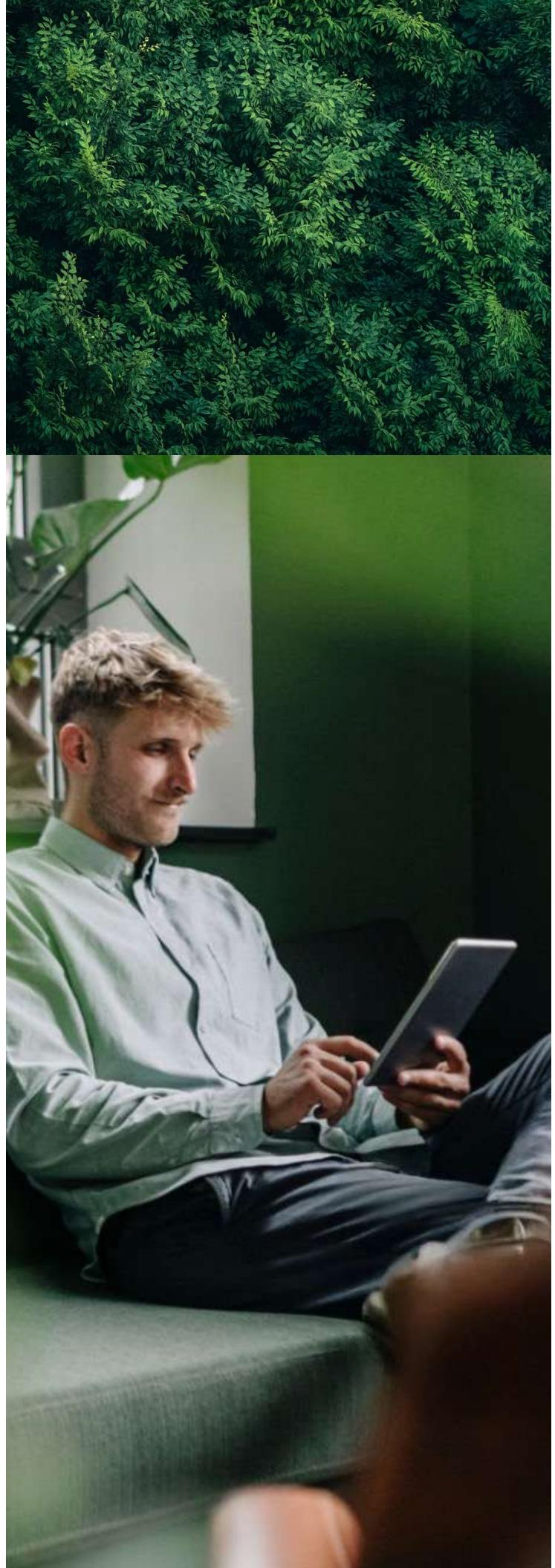
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# Summary

This article equips decision-makers to identify and address unconscious greenwashing: well-meant but ineffective sustainability efforts that quietly undermine environmental progress. Beyond missed impact, such initiatives often result in wasted capital, reputational risk, and declining employee engagement.

It highlights how common sustainability policies, such as deploying electric vehicle fleets, may fail to deliver results without employee buy-in and supportive systems. Authentic sustainability is more than policies and symbolic measures, it demands behavioral change and thoughtful measures across all levels of the organization.

By fostering green employee behavior through aligned incentives, visible leadership, and an enforcing culture, organizations can move beyond performative sustainability and drive measurable, lasting impact.





## Introduction

At first glance, Tenara Consulting Group<sup>1</sup> appears to embody green values, showcasing a fully electric vehicle fleet in glossy brochures and sustainability reports. The message is clear: Tenara consulting group is steering towards a more sustainable future. However, in reality, high leasing costs deter employees from using these vehicles. Instead, many opt for buying their own cheaper, petrol-powered cars, ultimately increasing the company's carbon footprint.

This paradox highlights a key issue in (not so) green organizational strategies: the gap between environmental intentions and real impact. Despite the electric fleet's appeal, the lack of practical support and incentives for employees weakens its effectiveness. This is not merely a case of poor implementation or misdirection, it can reflect unconscious greenwashing: where genuine, well-intentioned organizational efforts still misrepresent sustainability by ineffective or even counterintuitive outcomes.

Moreover, the challenge appears to be twofold. First, the organization has not succeeded in establishing incentives or support systems that actively promote sustainable choices. Without accessible and motivating structures, even well-intentioned sustainability measures risk falling flat. Second, employees seem reluctant to bear additional costs for the sustainable option, which may suggest a lack of personal commitment to environmentally responsible behavior. This shows sustainability does not survive by policy development alone but needs genuine engagement from both organization and employees. It's not just about the presence of sustainability measures, but whether they are designed with the right intent and properly embedded in daily practice.

<sup>1</sup> Fictional company name

# Intent versus impact

In the pursuit of sustainability, organizations often focus on designing initiatives that reflect their environmental values. Yet, good intentions alone do not guarantee meaningful outcomes. Figure 1 introduces a simple but powerful framework: a quadrant that maps organizational sustainability efforts along two axes, intent and impact. This model helps identify whether an organization's sustainability practices are genuinely effective or merely symbolic. It shows four possible scenarios:

- ① **Good intent, high impact:** authentic sustainability
- ② **Bad intent, high impact:** accidental success
- ③ **Good intent, low impact:** unconscious greenwashing
- ④ **Bad intent, low impact:** conscious greenwashing

When executed effectively, well-intentioned green organizational practices produce impactful environmental outcomes.<sup>2</sup> However, not all organizations have genuine intentions and/or achieve beneficial environmental impacts. As outlined in Figure 1 greenwashing occurs when no positive environmental impact is realized, irrespective of an organization's intentions.

Greenwashing is the act of misleading consumers about the environmental practices of an organization (organization-level) or the environmental benefits of a product or service (product/service-level).<sup>3</sup> This includes making unsubstantiated or deceptive statements

regarding the environmental advantages or sustainability of an organization or its products or services. It can also involve utilizing visual elements, packaging, or other marketing tactics to create a misleading perception of environmental friendliness.

Greenwashing can be either conscious or unconscious. Conscious greenwashing occurs when organizations deliberately appear environmentally responsible to attract employees, customers, and investors, without genuine sustainability efforts. This form is often perceived as corporate fraud; legally packed, morally bankrupt. Conversely, unconscious greenwashing affects organizations with good intentions: they genuinely believe they are being environmentally responsible. However, due to factors such as organizational overenthusiasm, lack of expertise, miscommunication or incomplete data, their efforts are less effective or comprehensive than assumed. Consequently, these organizations unknowingly engage in greenwashing, which makes it even worse than deliberate deception, because it hides behind good intentions.

The core of unconscious greenwashing lies in a lack of comprehensive understanding of the impact of measures on true sustainability. For instance, organizations might proudly promote the use of recycled materials in packaging while neglecting the substantial carbon footprint associated with the production processes of those materials<sup>4</sup>. Organizations focus on isolated aspects, neglecting the broader impacts of their policies, products and processes.



**Figure 1:** An organization's intent versus its environmental impact

# The consequences of unconscious greenwashing

Regardless of the intentions of (executive) decision-makers, unconscious greenwashing has a host of repercussions. Not only does unconscious greenwashing fail to deliver on sustainability goals, they also undermine the organization's overall success. Unconscious greenwashing poses significant risks in financial exposure, erosion of stakeholder trust, reputational damage, compliance issues, and declining employee engagement, all of which can severely impact long-term performance and resilience.

**① Financial risk:** Investments made with positive environmental goals are a waste of financial resources if they don't deliver. Moreover, when unconscious greenwashing is exposed, it may lead to fines, lawsuits, and regulatory sanctions in countries and unions that actively enforce them<sup>2</sup>.

**② Erosion of stakeholder trust:** Unconscious greenwashing can silently kill credibility. Stakeholders lose confidence in companies that fail to deliver on their sustainability promises, especially with the increasing focus on ESG-metrics. Greenwashing is found to lead to decreased brand loyalty and negative perceptions<sup>5</sup>. Even unintentional missteps can backfire by undermining credibility and damaging long-term brand equity and investor confidence.

**③ Impact on employees:** This is a crucial consequence that is often overlooked by (executive) decision-makers and external observers. Employees, especially those who are personally committed to sustainability, may become disillusioned and demotivated when they perceive a disconnect between the organization's stated values and its actual practices. This misalignment can lead to:

- **Lower moral:** Employees may feel disheartened if they believe their employer is not genuinely committed to sustainability, reducing overall job satisfaction.
- **Reduced engagement:** When sustainability efforts appear superficial or performative, employees are less likely to feel inspired or go the extra mile in their roles.
- **Increased churn:** In a competitive job market, employees who prioritize environmental values may seek out organizations that demonstrate authentic commitment. Companies with strong sustainability reputations are more successful in attracting and retaining top talent<sup>6</sup>.
- **Less attraction of talent:** A reputation for greenwashing can deter environmentally conscious job seekers. According to Cone Communications<sup>7</sup>, a significant percentage of candidates consider a company's social and environmental commitments when evaluating potential employers.
- **Decreased productivity:** Disengaged and demoralized employees tend to be less productive, which can negatively affect overall business performance.

These effects create a self-reinforcing cycle: as sustainability-minded employees leave or disengage, the organization is left with a workforce less inclined to challenge the status quo.

<sup>2</sup> Horobet, A., Smedoiu-Popoviciu, A., Oprescu, R. et al. Seeing through the haze: greenwashing and the cost of capital in technology firms. *Environ Dev Sustain* 27, 21651–21682 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-024-04817-w>

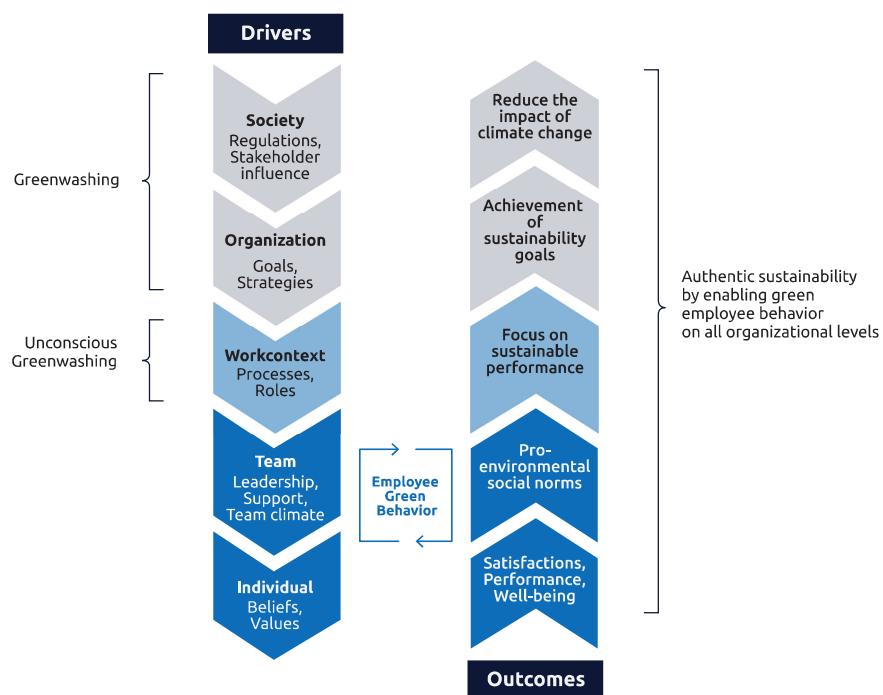
<sup>3</sup> Delmas M.A., Burbano, V.C. (2011): The Drivers of Greenwashing, *California Management Review*, Vol.54, No.1.

<sup>4</sup> Delmas, M. A., & Burbano, V. C. (2011). "Greenwashing: Firms' Social Responsibility and the Role of Stakeholders." *California Management Review*, 54(1), 64-87.

# Moving towards authentic sustainability by driving green employee behavior

Addressing unconscious greenwashing requires a fundamental shift in perspective. A truly sustainable organization does not merely respond to external pressures or rely on top-down strategies. Instead, (executive) decisionmakers must approach their sustainability transformation through the lens of employee behavior.<sup>8</sup>

Green employee behavior encompasses all scalable actions employees engage in that either contribute to or detract from environmental sustainability. These behaviors form the foundation of authentic organizational sustainability, because no sustainability goals can be achieved without active involvement of employees at all levels.<sup>9</sup> However, employees can only act sustainably when the right conditions are created for them.



**Figure 2:** Inspired by Zacher, H., Rudolph, C. W., & Katz, I. M. (2023). Employee green behavior as the core of environmentally sustainable organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10(1), 465-494.

<sup>2</sup> Petros Sehatu, S., & Enquist, B. (2007). ISO 14001 as a driving force for sustainable development and value creation. *The TQM Magazine*, 19(5), 468-482.; Khan, N. R., Malik, F., Khan, M. R., Khan, I., & Ghouri, A. M. (2025). Organizational sustainability: the role of environmentally focused practices in enhancing environmental performance—an emerging market perspective. *Discover Sustainability*, 6(1), 73.

<sup>5</sup> Dangelico, R. M., & Vocalelli, D. (2017). "Green Marketing": An Analysis of Definitions, Strategy Steps, and Tools through a Systematic Review of the Literature. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 165, 1263-1279.

<sup>6</sup> Edmans, A. (2011). Does the Stock Market Fully Value Intangibles? Employee Satisfaction and Equity Prices. *Journal of Financial Economics*.

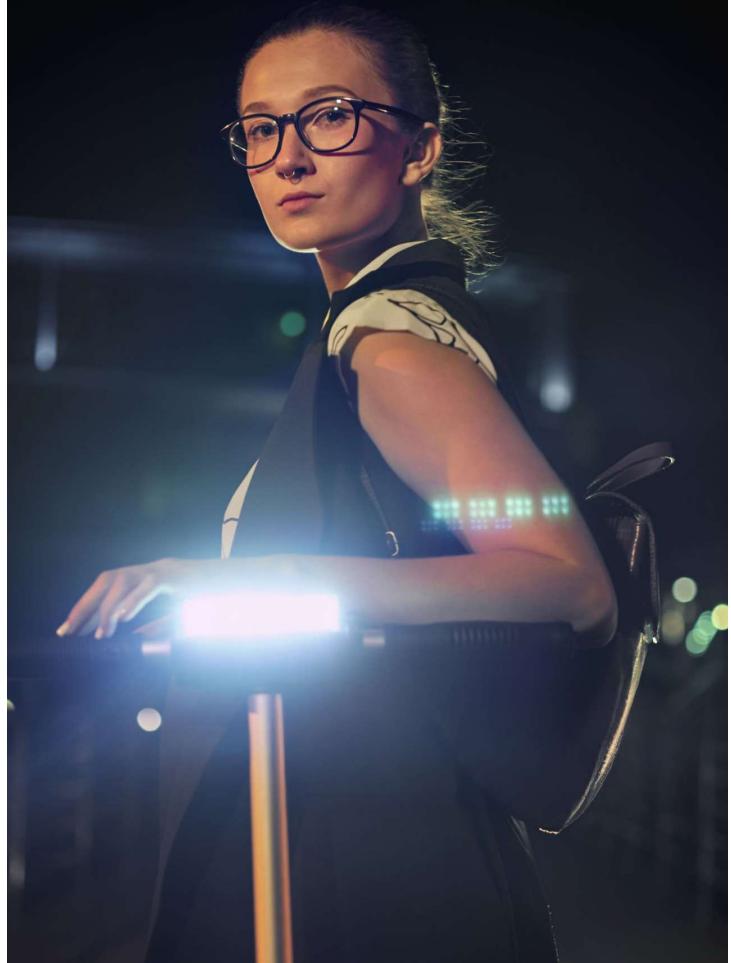
<sup>7</sup> 2017 Cone Communications CSR Study. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.cone.com/research-blog/2017-csr-study>.

Figure 2 shows that only stating sustainability goals incentivized by external pressures, without taking action to reach them or solely designing processes and policies from a goal-perspective, is not enough. Preventing unconscious greenwashing requires all layers of drivers. Therefore, organizations should start by translating their sustainability goals to employee behavior in their specific work context.

Enabling green behavior in organizations goes far beyond setting ambitious sustainability goals. The real challenge and opportunity lies in systematically lowering barriers and building practical enablers at every level of the organization. Research confirms that sustainable change happens when organizations make green choices easy, visible, and rewarding for employees<sup>16</sup>. In essence, authentic sustainability comes from embedding sustainability into daily work, supported by leadership and reinforced through organizational processes, team culture, and individual motivation.

## Work context: green behavior by organizational design

The work context encompasses all organizational processes, policies, and roles, the actual tangible measures an organization can design and implement to enable sustainable behavior. While many organizations state their sustainability objectives, they are often developed primarily from an outside-in perspective, rather than systematically changing roles and processes to reflect the goals. Similar to the example of Tenara Consulting Group, providing an electric vehicle fleet without considering employees' affordability or commuting patterns overlooks the practicalities that influence the work-context. Examples of LEGO, AFAS and Schneider illustrate developing conscious sustainability measures in the work context.



- LEGO incorporates measures in the work context by using explicit monetary incentives. By creating a direct connection between the employee bonuses and the organization's sustainability goals<sup>10</sup>, there is a favorable and attractive reason to implement sustainability procedures and roles.
- AFAS makes sustainable choices in employees' private lives more accessible by creating loans for sustainable housing or commute investment<sup>11</sup>. These policies reflect favorable working and commuting activities which are directly aimed at employees.
- Schneider Electric encourages employees to live more sustainably at home through its Sustainability@Home program. Employees can receive up to \$600 annually for eco-friendly purchases like solar panels or compost bins from Schneider and other brands, earn rewards for sustainable habits via a wellness app, and access discounts on green products and monthly educational sessions to build environmental awareness<sup>12</sup>.

When organizations design sustainability processes and procedures around employees' needs by addressing financial, practical, and motivational factors, they make sustainable choices easier and more rewarding in daily work. This means aligning incentives with green goals, simplifying processes so sustainable options are the default, and offering programs that build awareness and engagement.

<sup>8</sup> Zacher, H., Rudolph, C. W., & Katz, I. M. (2023). Employee green behavior as the core of environmentally sustainable organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10(1), 465-494.

<sup>9</sup> Ones DS, Dilchert S, Wiernik BM, Klein RM. 2018. Environmental sustainability at work. In *The SAGE Handbook of Industrial, Work and Organizational Psychology*, ed. DS Ones, N Anderson, C Viswesvaran, HKSinangil, pp. 351–73. London: SAGE



## Team: guiding towards a green culture

Behavioural change within organizations often spreads informally through peer influence rather than formal policies or hierarchical directives. Employees are more likely to adopt sustainable habits when they see trusted colleagues doing the same. In many cases, informal networks and team dynamics have a stronger impact on behaviour than top-down instructions. Fostering a culture where addressing unsustainable actions is encouraged and supported is key<sup>18</sup>. This enforcement is reached through leadership, and essential in translating sustainability into everyday (team-)practices<sup>13</sup>:

- Through role modeling: Employees take cues from leadership. When leaders visibly practice sustainable behaviors, like reducing waste or integrating sustainability explicitly into their decisions, they signal that these actions are valued and expected.

- With committed decision-making: Leaders must also make decisions that create the conditions for employees to act sustainably. This includes removing barriers, providing resources, recognizing green efforts and holding teams accountable.
- By creating accessibility: Leaders play a role in making green behavior the 'new normal'. This can be done by integrating specific, intuitive, routine-based actions, supported by triggers or social norms.<sup>14</sup>

Initiatives at Patagonia offer a great example. The company's leaders, inspired by founder Yvon Chouinard, consistently role model sustainable behavior: from refusing fast growth in favour of environmental responsibility to encouraging employees to repair rather than replace gear. Managers were empowered to embed sustainability into team routines, such as organizing environmental activism days and integrating sustainability into performance reviews. This consistent, values-driven leadership fosters a team culture where sustainability is not just encouraged, but it becomes the norm, embedded in everyday decisions and behaviors across all levels of the organization.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Segal, M. (2024, May 15). LEGO Group Ties Bonuses for All Employees to Emissions Reduction Goals. ESG Today. <https://www.esgtoday.com/lego-group-ties-bonuses-for-all-employees-to-emissions-reduction-goals/>

<sup>11</sup> AFAS stimuleert medewerkers om huis te verduurzamen. (2022). Afas.nl; AFAS Software. <https://www.afas.nl/persbericht/afas-stimuleert-medewerkers-om-huis-te-verduurzamen>

<sup>12</sup> How Schneider Electric's HR team encourages employees to be greener at home. (n.d.). HR Brew. <https://www.hr-brew.com/stories/2023/11/14/how-schneider-electric-s-hr-team-encourages-employees-to-be-greener-at-home>

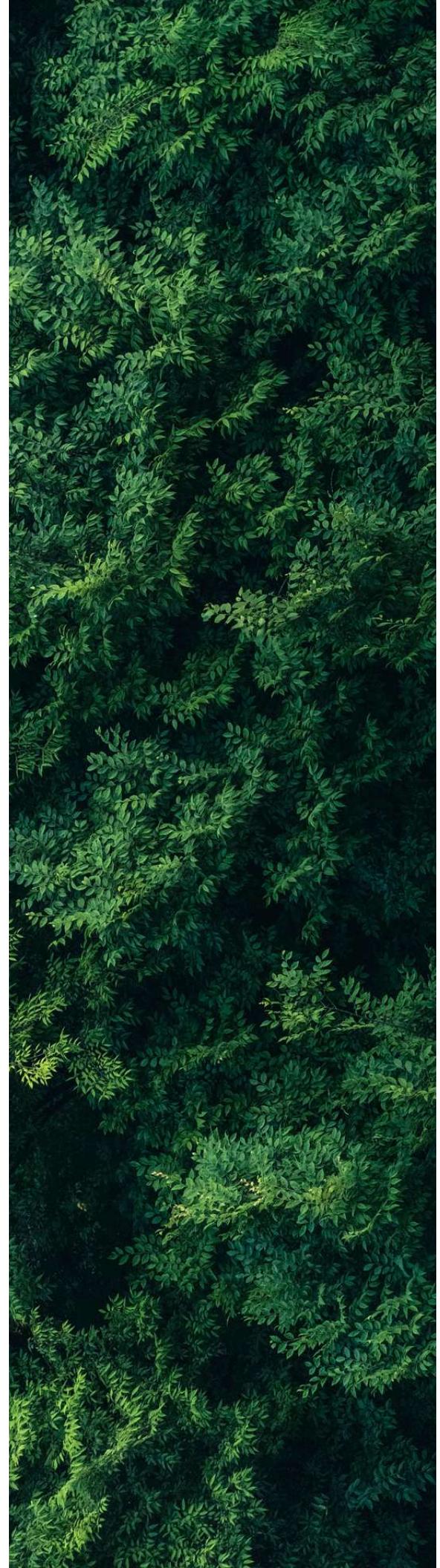
# Conclusion

The path to authentic sustainability isn't merely paved with good intentions and superficial sustainability reports. It's developed through the conscious choices an organization makes and the culture surrounding that. Unconscious greenwashing happens when organizations, without realizing it, design policies that look great on paper but don't result in tangible, real-world differences. When the focus is just on checking boxes rather than changing behavior, resources are wasted, credibility is undermined, and the opportunity is missed to create to make a real difference for the company and its employees.

The consequences? Customers and stakeholders can spot the difference between true impact and empty gestures. Employees see the gap between what's promised and what's practiced, resulting in many negative effects. Worst of all, real progress stalls, and we risk falling behind in a world that's demanding more from organizations to set the right example.

So, what's the way forward for decision makers? It's time to place your employees at the heart of sustainability. Listen to what drives or blocks their sustainable actions. Make green choices simple, visible, and rewarding. Don't just set policies and process descriptions but bring them to life through supporting work-context systems, leadership and (team-)culture. When sustainability becomes second nature for everyone, from executive-level to operations, only then do we see real, measurable change.

If you want to be remembered for more than just ambitious statements, you need to lead by example, stay honest about progress, and empower teams to make sustainability real, every single day. That's how you move from greenwashing, even the unconscious kind, to authentic sustainability with true impact.



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