

EMBEDDING SUSTAINABILITY IN YOUR NARRATIVE:

RISK, READINESS AND OPPORTUNITY

Communication that Matters Report Series 2022

Sefiani



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01 INTRODUCTION

The 2022 federal election ushered in a new era for Australia. Climate change and heightened attention on social sustainability – including listening to the lived experiences of women and desired action to enshrine a First Nations voice in our Constitution – emerged as focal points for voters and the new government alike.

While local at their heart, these issues have emerged against a complex global backdrop, at a time when the world sits on the cusp of change.

In 2021 the [International Panel on Climate Change](#) declared a ‘code red for humanity’, swiftly followed by the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), which focused on the progress businesses and governments around the world had made (or had failed to make) on the path toward sustainability and decarbonisation. Both events were a global clarion call, an urgent appeal to publicly refocus and turbo-charge efforts worldwide towards a planned yet swift transition to a sustainable future.

Australian business leaders have been seeking change too; organisations of all sizes have stepped-up to have a voice –

and take an active role – in supporting this transition. One of the most prominent is Atlassian co-founder and co-CEO Mike Cannon-Brookes, who has committed \$1.5 billion to climate projects before 2030 and more recently, after taking a major stake in AGL, reversed the company’s strategy of demerging coal-fired generation assets. Cannon-Brookes has also publicly committed to taking Australia’s largest carbon emitter to net zero by 2035.

Of course, not every organisation or leader has the platform – or the funds – to be as bold and direct in their action. But every business leader has a prerogative to consider what more can be done. And with a new Government swept to power on a mandate for change, every organisation and every business leader will have a critical role to play. Now is the time to demonstrate vision and leadership to re-engage stakeholders on a positive path forward.

The role of communications

Since launching Sefiani’s Sustainability Practice 12 months ago, we have had the opportunity to partner with global and Australian organisations to help them communicate steps they are taking on their path to a more sustainable future.

Each of our partners is at a different stage in communicating their sustainability strategy, initiatives and actions, but they all share a similar challenge. While executives and employees want to do and say more about sustainability, they are held back by hesitation over how much to say, how far to go, and how bold to be.

The issue boils down to one thing – fear.

Fear of suffering reputational damage after saying the wrong thing, being misinterpreted by stakeholders or being accused of greenwashing. Fear of how to navigate sustainability risk and opportunity across a complex and evolving backdrop to a multitude of stakeholders. And fear of being able to successfully balance past realities with present demands while creating a credible vision for the future.

Fear is holding businesses back, but change is within reach

To gain a deeper understanding from a communicator's perspective, we conducted the **Sefiani Sustainability Communications Survey**. The Survey included in-depth, qualitative interviews with more than 20 sustainability marketing and communications leaders in Australia and overseas, and uncovered some concerning trends:

- While 90% said that it was important for brands to have an authentic position on sustainability, 80% believed that most brands did not have such a position.
- More than two thirds believed that most companies did not have an overarching vision for their sustainability commitments.
- 86% agreed that 'driving positive change beyond your company's footprint' was needed to be recognised as a sustainability leader.

This raises critical questions: is anyone doing sustainability well and if so, who? And why are companies getting sustainability so wrong when the ambition to drive real action and establish an authentic voice is clear?

Our findings show the urgency around improved sustainability communications has never been greater, the complexities never more challenging, and the rewards never more meaningful.

Finding the opportunities

The purpose of this report is to set out a practical framework, global insights and best practice case examples to help communicators address these fears and help their organisation communicate authentically about sustainability. We draw on our own learnings together with those from experts in consumer behaviour, trust and sustainability. Most importantly, we demonstrate the critical role that communicators play in helping their organisation and leaders shape positive change that leads to a more sustainable future.

We focus on three key opportunities for organisations to embed sustainability authentically into their company narrative:

01

Finding your 'North Star'
 Aligning purpose and sustainability

02

Tapping into your superpower
 Turning employees into sustainability champions

03

Communicating your vision with courage
 Balancing risk, readiness and reputation

Now is the time for companies to create and sustain a sense of optimism, fueling great possibilities for the future. This is a moment in time where leaders have social license to talk about their vision for the future, even if they don't have all the answers. It requires us to balance risk, readiness and reputation to communicate in a way that will mobilise people, tap into our currently charged-up society in Australia, get creative, and ultimately, become agents of change.

Aligning on sustainability

The United Nations has defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”.

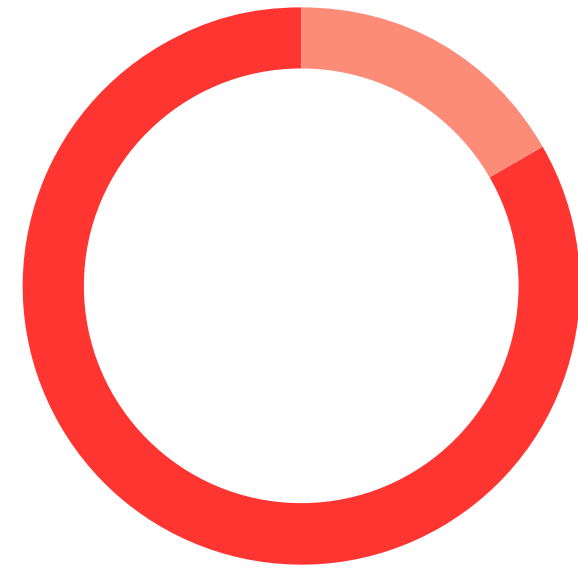
In 2015, the UN adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal call-to-action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The SDGs aim to make it easier for individuals, companies and governments to identify priority areas and develop action plans. They are designed to align every country, organisation, leader and community group toward the same goals and the same outcomes.

Sustainability is more than just the environment or climate change. It encompasses a range of interconnected factors from gender equality to clean water and sanitation, from sustainable cities to responsible consumption.

Source: United Nations SDGs

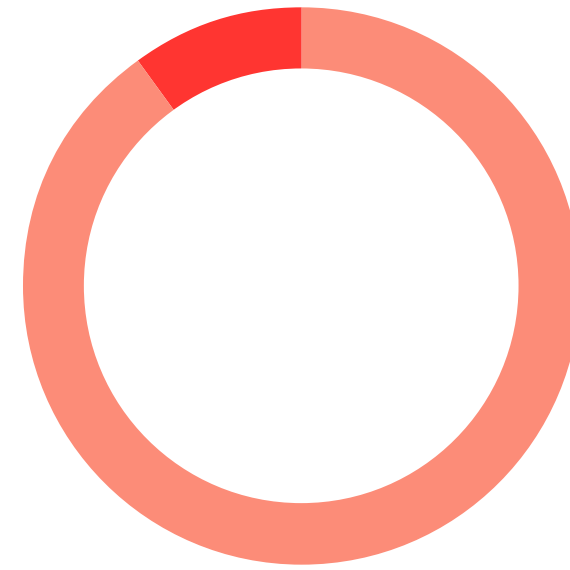


Sefiani Sustainability Communications Survey: key findings



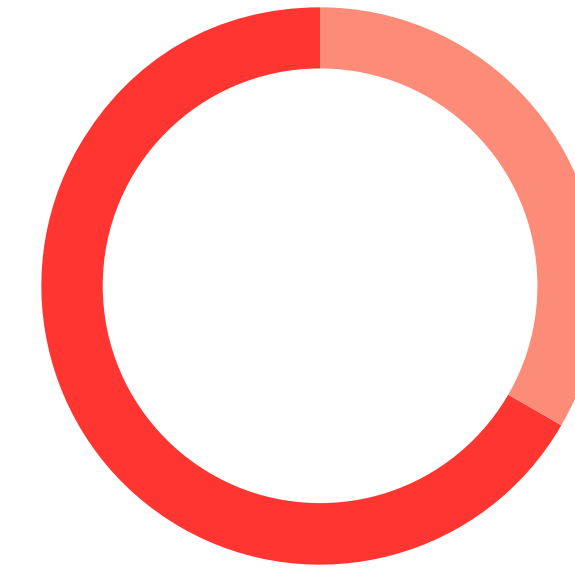
Four out of five

believe the majority of brands do not have a unique or genuine position on sustainability



90%

believe it is important for brands to have an authentic voice on sustainability

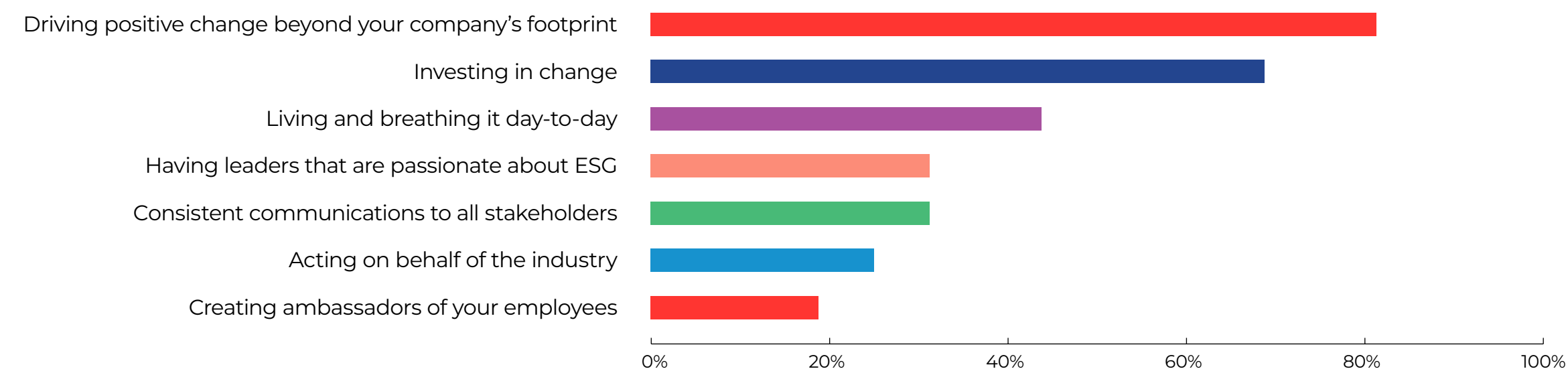


More than two-thirds

believe most companies did not have an overarching vision for their sustainability commitments

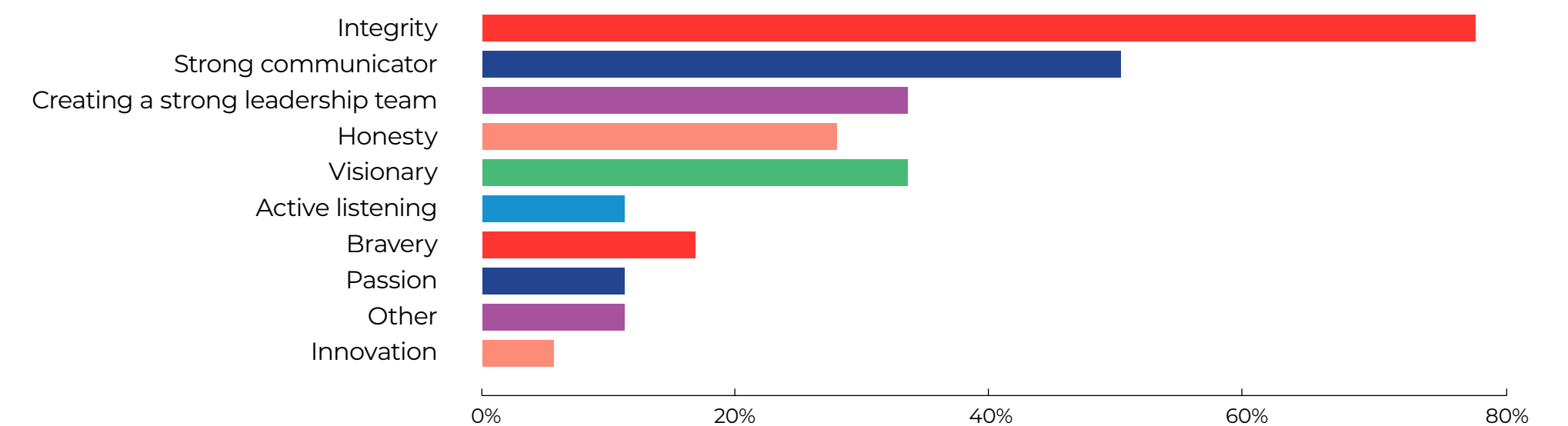
86% agreed

'driving positive change beyond your company's footprint' is needed to be recognised as a sustainability leader



Almost 80%

state the number one trait of sustainability leadership is integrity



Source: Sefiani Sustainability Communications Survey, March 2022

02 THE BIGGER PICTURE

Australian organisations operate against a complex backdrop of geopolitical uncertainty, shifting tensions, regulatory requirements in flux, economic challenges, as well as consumer demand for climate action, continued social change and reform.

Clearly, communicators need to understand this larger context. When communicating sustainability, the following considerations matter:

- 01 Rising demands:** brands are earning a place in communities by making a difference and proving themselves to be genuine changemakers. With the private sector charged to drive transformational change, bold, brave and clear action and communication will be rewarded.
- 02 Evolving expectations of leaders:** the 2022 Federal Election was a demonstration of the public's re-evaluation of leadership. A new breed of authentic leadership is coming to the fore, and those with a clear vision for the future are having real impact and influence. Traditional power is evolving, as citizens look to both local and global leaders for transformational change.
- 03 Skepticism continues to grow:** consumers, investors and employees are skeptical and critical of big corporations with small stories to tell.
- 04 Risk of being publicly criticised:** while fear may be a barrier to companies communicating their path to sustainability, a more sustainable future relies on organisations that are doing well telling their stories and sharing their learnings, to inspire others.
- 05 Sustainability is on the executive agenda:** EY's Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO), Mathew Nelson, says CSOs are fast joining the ranks of CFOs and COOs to drive business value and sustainable impact, while instilling accountability in sustainability at the executive level.

03 EMBEDDING SUSTAINABILITY AUTHENTICALLY INTO YOUR NARRATIVE

Effective communication is vital to the success of any sustainability strategy. As communicators we have the power to inform, inspire, change mindsets and equip people with the knowledge and skills needed to be agents of change.

It is remarkable that Sefiani's **Sustainability Communications Survey** highlighted the importance of brands having an authentic position on sustainability, yet 80% of respondents said they believed that the majority of organisations did not have anything unique to say.

So how do you define your authentic story and start to embed this into the company narrative?

SECTION 3.1

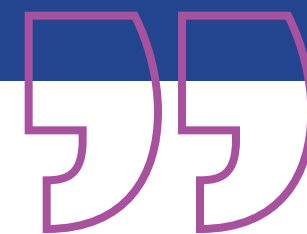
01 Finding your 'North Star'

Sustainability is often siloed, sitting within separate departments within an organisation. Few have managed to elevate the conversation to an overarching narrative that is meaningful for all stakeholders – from consumers to investors, employees, partners, citizens and government.



Sustainability action is still largely buried in corporate communications unless it is fundamental to a brand or company purpose.

Senior Leader in the financial services sector,
Sefiani Sustainability Communications Survey, March 2022



One of the most powerful ways to achieve this is by identifying an organisation's 'North Star'. This is the definition of a company's purpose, values and sustainability actions from which everything else – strategy, products, policies and ultimately, its value proposition – is defined. Clarity about a company's North Star leads founders and companies toward their goals and helps investors visualise the company's future.

Your 'North Star'

Allows communicators to bring complex activity together under one overarching narrative

Becomes a focus so organisations do not become overwhelmed and attempt to communicate everything to everyone

Helps to connect tactical initiatives – whether creative marketing campaigns, communication initiatives or product launches – to the overarching business narrative and strategy

Allows organisations to authentically embed sustainability initiatives into their strategy and communicate them in a way that connects with stakeholders and builds positive brand equity.

Finding your North Star – aligning sustainability to purpose

Authenticity in communications becomes possible when an organisation's purpose is the foundation on which its sustainability efforts rest.

Defining your company's purpose can be challenging. But the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford defines purpose simply in its framework for Board of Directors in 'Enacting purpose within the modern corporation'. It is an articulation of why an organisation exists.

Purpose is not the same thing as sustainability, but it is foundational to it.

According to Robin Nuttall, a leader of McKinsey's sustainability and regulatory strategy, three things matter when considering how to create a purpose-led sustainability strategy. First is 'why' a company exists – its purpose. Second is the action an organisation takes to create a positive impact on the world – the 'what'. And third, the 'why' needs to link to the 'what', creating the business strategy and framework for communications.

This approach provides for meaningful and compelling stories that are robust enough to exist outside an annual sustainability report and can come to life at a brand level across multiple

platforms and creative assets. It also helps support strategic decision-making around which aspects of sustainability are communicated to who, when, and across which channels.

When purpose and sustainability come together, organisations are better equipped to develop a narrative that balances past realities with present demands with a vision for the future. A unified 'North Star' allows for honesty, vulnerability and transparency, and inspires creativity in storytelling.

Communicating your North Star

Building an authentic, uplifting and honest sustainability narrative that conveys a sense of shared identity and captures your 'North Star' can be challenging.

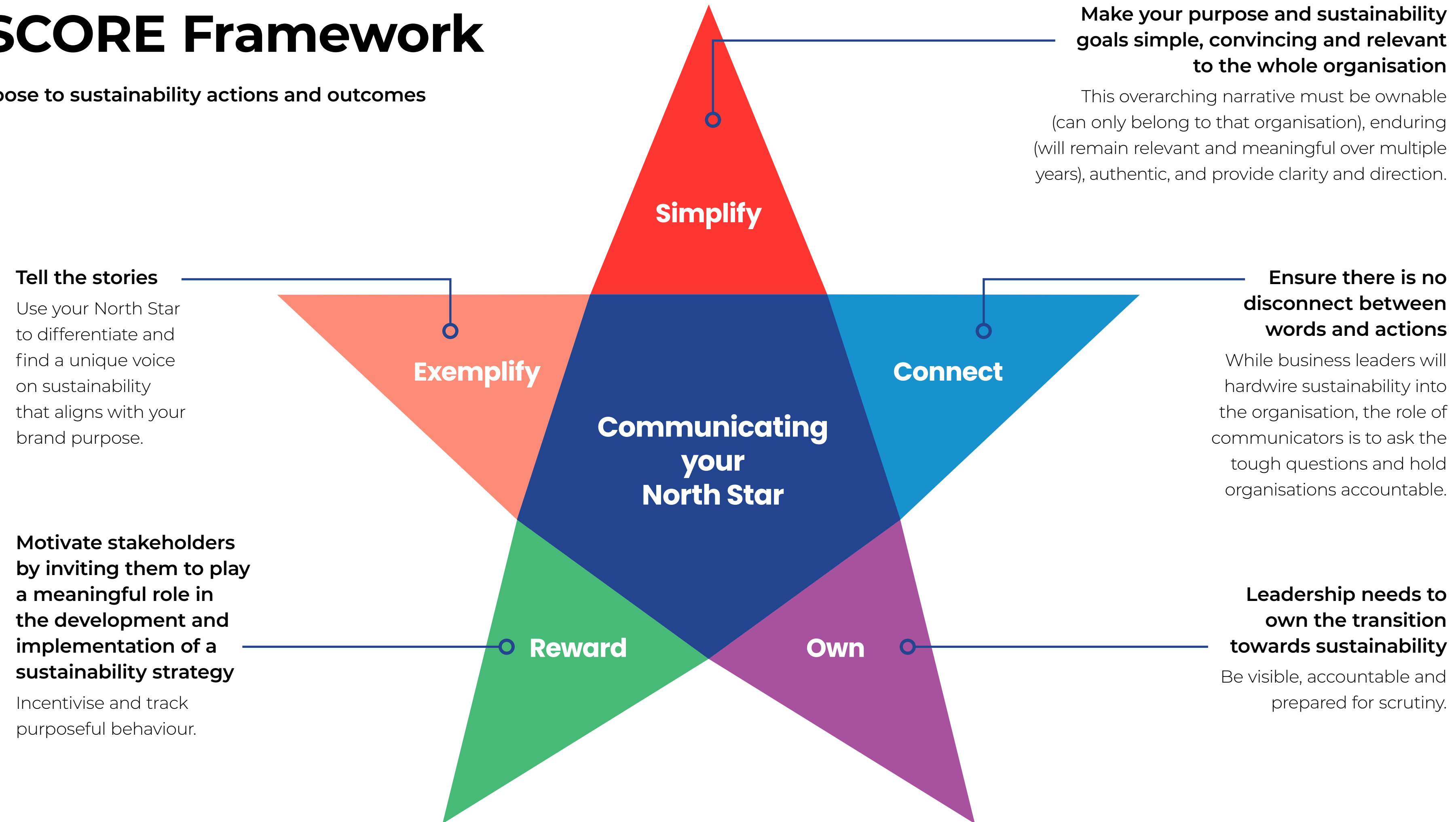
Sefiani has adapted a practical approach to assist with this, based on the SCORE framework, which was developed through a partnership between The University of Oxford, Berkeley Law and The British Academy.

A company's approach to sustainability needs to be true to its mission and purpose, and the people it employs and serves.

Survey respondent,
Sefiani Sustainability Communications Survey, March 2022

The SCORE Framework

Aligning purpose to sustainability actions and outcomes



Unlocking creativity

Creativity is one of the most powerful ways to bring a sustainability strategy to life authentically. When creativity is approached through the lens of your North Star, sustainability storytelling is simplified and activated in a way that is unique to your brand because it links back to what the brand stands for.

Creativity captures attention. It enables an organisation to tap into powerful emotions and connect with stakeholders in an original and memorable way. Creativity is persuasive and can help with behaviour change that leads to long-term sustainable outcomes.

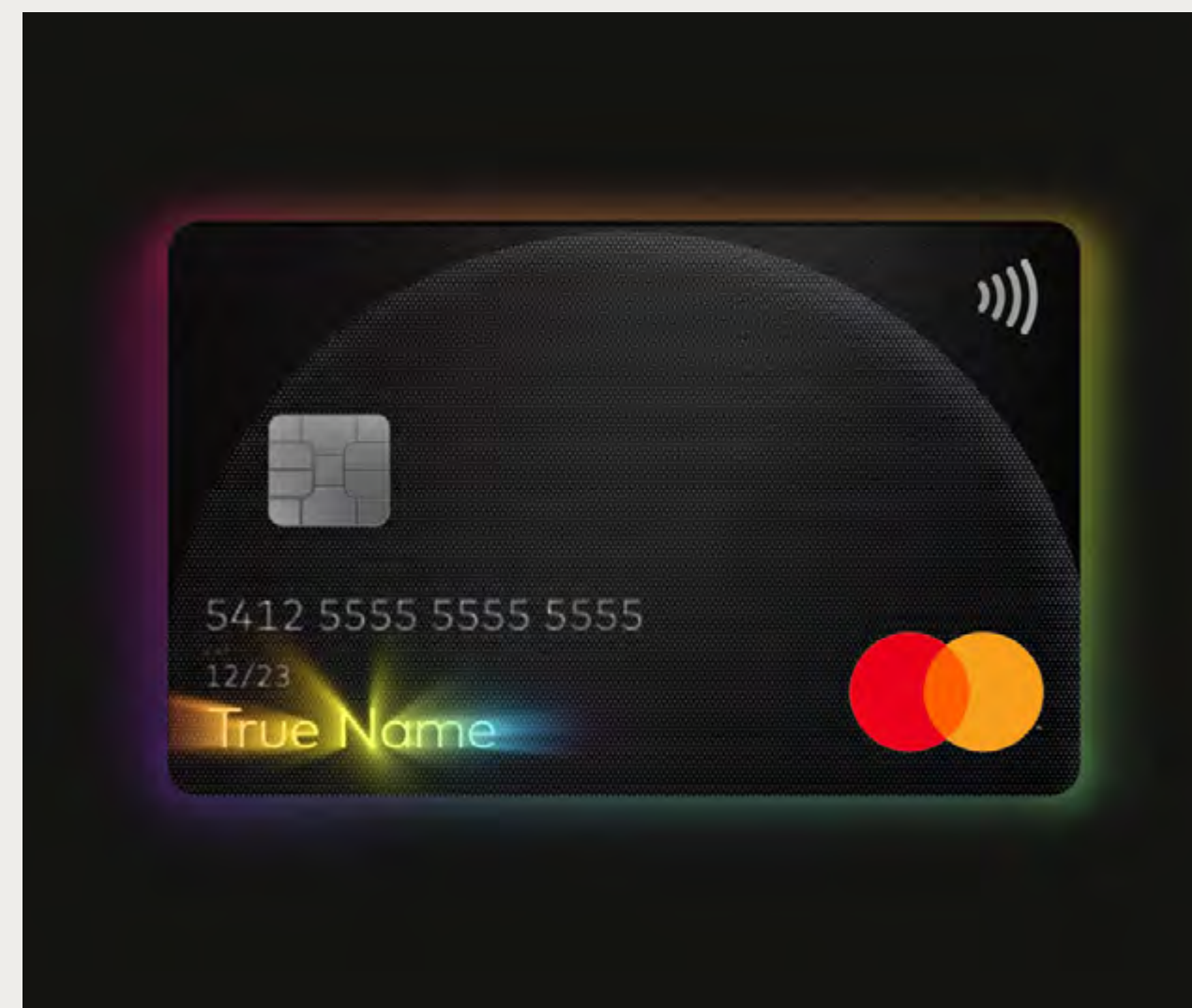
It is often the difficult choices – the trade-offs and risk-taking – that can drive the most impactful sustainability initiatives and truly embody an organisation's purpose. While these decisions can be commercially sensitive or confidential, finding a way to explain them to a broad audience in a compelling, creative way leads to powerful and transformative communication.

CASE STUDY

WHEN IT WORKS: Mastercard True Name

When Mastercard learned that 32% of transgender people who've shown an ID card with a name or gender that didn't match their gender presentation have been verbally harassed, denied service, or assaulted, it knew it had to help drive change. The result is True Name – the first payment product where people can feature their chosen name on their card. Mastercard worked with partners to ensure the act wasn't purely a change of name on the card – but rather a change from a complete customer service standpoint, including all in-person and digital interactions. Over the past few years, Mastercard has continued to secure partnerships with banks around the world to set a new industry standard in issues of identity, with the organisation [commenting](#) “creativity is our way to compete and to be seen as a leader and a change agent”.

Source: Mastercard



CASE STUDY

WHEN IT GOES WRONG: Rio Tinto

In May 2020, Australia experienced a moment of collective outrage when Rio Tinto destroyed a 46,000-year-old sacred Aboriginal shelter at Juukan Gorge in Western Australia to make way for the expansion of an iron-ore mine. For an organisation that claimed to recognise the cultural, spiritual and physical connections that Indigenous people had to that land, it was clear that their words and actions did not connect. The result was significant reputational damage, public aftershock still felt today, and departures of the company Chair, CEO and several executives.



Source: The Guardian



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

- Communicators have the power to hold organisations accountable – balance risk and reputation by instilling accountability within internal teams, so words and actions align.
- When purpose and sustainability work together, powerful storytelling becomes possible and can exist creatively across all marketing channels.
- Identifying and articulating your sustainability ‘North Star’ builds on an organisation’s purpose, and allows businesses to honestly address past realities while communicating a vision for the future.
- Organisations and brands do not need to be everything to everyone. Stay focused on your ‘North Star’ and keep communications simple and consistent around this positioning.
- An authentic voice is created by identifying what an organisation, brand or individual has social license to talk about. Your license is found at the intersection of what the brand stands for, what your audience cares about, and what the world needs.

SECTION 3.2

02 Tapping into your superpower

Employees are an organisation's most powerful advocates for creating impact, both inside and outside the business. Building a workforce that is highly engaged and activated in sustainability initiatives is critical to the success and delivery of any sustainability strategy.

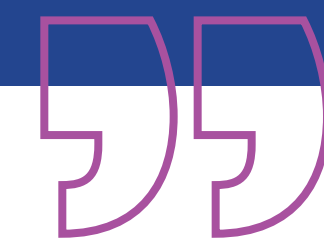
Consistent communication to inform and educate an internal audience, and sharing stories about how people and teams are making a difference, can mobilise and inspire. However, sustainability communications for employees needs to go deeper.

When asked what employees want more of when it comes to sustainability, marketing and communications leaders interviewed in Sefiani's **Sustainability Communications Survey** said their teams wanted the ability to shape strategy and be actively involved in helping the organisation meet its commitments.



What do employees want when it comes to Sustainability? More opportunities to shape it.

Industry respondent,
Sefiani Sustainability Communications Survey, March 2022



Turning employees into sustainability champions

In its [Future of Work Trends 2022](#) report, global consulting firm Korn Ferry states that employees will no longer accept a lack of care for society or the environment, and will turn their backs on businesses that won't commit to sustainability goals.

The firm predicts more organisations will realise science alone will not get them to where they need to be, but rather, meaningful transformation requires changes in mindsets and skillsets. Everyone in an organisation needs to be activated to deliver, or sustainability efforts will fall short.

So, how can communicators activate employees to create a culture of engagement that supports a successful transition to a sustainable future?

In line with **Sefiani's Sustainability Communications Survey**, Korn Ferry's [Future of Work Trends 2022](#) finds few people are prepared to alter their attitudes and beliefs simply because senior management tells them to. Communicators have a key role to play in giving people a say, seeking their input, involving them in planning, and working to educate and align hearts and minds around a company's sustainability goals.

By activating an organisation's purpose internally, embedding it into the culture and aligning it to values and behaviours, employees gain a clear understanding of how their role can directly contribute to the achievement of purpose more broadly and sustainability goals more specifically.

Korn Ferry also recommends instilling ownership; when people are made accountable, they feel like valued and important members of the organisation. This sense of ownership inspires people to act more purposefully.

Democratisation of sustainability leadership

Meaningful transformation is a collective effort. **The Harvard Business Review's** ['The Myth of the CEO superhero'](#) captures it perfectly: "addressing the interconnected emergencies facing our societies and planet will demand systems change, and no CEO can deliver this change on their own. While there can be leaders, luminaries and innovators, there can be no singular heroes. Transformations on this scale are a team sport".

Embedding sustainability into an organisation requires more than top-down elected working groups and executive initiatives. Sustainability stewardship and leadership can present itself in many forms across the full spectrum of an organisation, from the Board to the shopfront. While the executive team will ensure sustainability is part of the business strategy, it is an organisation's employees who will bring a sustainability roadmap to life in a meaningful and enduring way.

Identifying, engaging and empowering sustainability leaders from all areas within an organisation can be a key role of communications teams. Meaningful communication leading to transformational change begins at the grassroots.

CASE STUDY

Empowering employees

Unilever believes it is not enough just to have sustainability champions at the top. Within the company's professional development pathways, each leader is encouraged to empower employees to identify their 'personal purpose' and link it to a sustainability area within Unilever. This is tied to business growth and every employee's work to inform solutions that are presented to the business leadership. The approach works: [76% of Unilever's employees](#) say they feel their role enables them to deliver on the company's broader sustainability agenda.



CASE STUDY

Living values through business practices

Australian venture capital firm OneVentures took a leadership stance within the industry in 2021 by announcing a new responsible investment filter for all future portfolio commitments. It was one of the first VC firms in Australia to formally commit to only investing in companies demonstrating strong sustainability principles. However, the idea of investing for good was far from new to founder Dr Michelle Deaker and the OneVentures team. Rather, the policy was an extension of how OneVentures has always conducted itself, with partners and employees who are passionate about using venture capital to solve large-scale social and environmental problems. Launching a responsible investment commitment publicly signaled to investors, entrepreneurs and talent (as well as existing employees) that OneVentures is at the cutting-edge of the work being done to tackle multi-billion-dollar problems facing the world today, revealing new opportunities in the years to come.

Using sustainability to win the war on talent

Candidates make critical decisions relating to future employment based on a company's ability to communicate their sustainability position and how they live up to their commitments. They are drawn to (or from) a business on this basis, which means tangible, meaningful action on sustainability is no longer a nice-to-have, but critical to attracting and retaining talent.

In Australia, those winning the war on talent have an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) that puts purpose and sustainability at the centre, in a way that is compelling and differentiated.



Credit: Photo by Joel Muniz on Unsplash



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

- Employees want to be active participants – engage them early and ensure communication does not just inform early employees, but activates them to play an important role in the shaping of sustainability plans.
- Aligning action to an organisation's overarching purpose is crucial to building a culture of transformation; the overarching narrative should connect everything a company does, including all employee communications.
- Make sure there is no disconnect between promises and actions – employees will be the first to sense this gap, and are increasingly likely to vote with their feet.
- Identify and empower employees throughout the entire organisation to become sustainability leaders. Peer-to-peer leadership has the potential to be more powerful than executive communications in this instance.
- Ensure sustainability and purpose are front and centre of the Employee Value Proposition in a way that is unique and enduring for the organisation.

SECTION 3.3

03 Communicating your vision with courage

Impactful leaders will be the ones with the courage and support to commit to change. Fear of saying the wrong thing or making difficult and finely-balanced decisions that alienate one group of stakeholders to the advantage of another can prevent organisations and their leaders from saying anything meaningful (or memorable).

For those willing to show up consistently, hold themselves accountable for the actions of their business, people and partners – now is the moment to establish a strong and reputable leadership position. True leaders will look outward to drive change beyond their own company, displaying empathy, leading with integrity, and creating an honest vision for the future.

A new era of leadership

The constant evolution of expectations placed on leaders is exciting, and at times, daunting. CEOs and their senior executives must balance the needs of all stakeholders while also becoming public-facing advocates on key social and environmental issues.

The speed and scale of transition to stronger sustainability principles and action is fueled by a company's leadership – a team that must be visible and prepared for scrutiny. There is enormous opportunity for business leaders to drive meaningful, transformative change, but with leadership behaviours so closely linked to brand value, the stakes have increased.

“

Scrutiny is high, there is no tolerance for greenwashing or spin. Leaders need to be willing to openly state aspirations and publicly hold themselves to account on the way there.

Respondent,
Sefiani Sustainability Communications Survey, March 2022

”

To assist in balancing risk, readiness and effective storytelling, communicators can prepare executives to take a leadership role with accountability and integrity. There are five key behaviours leaders need to consider in order to be impactful and authentic in their communication with all stakeholders:

01

Act with integrity

Almost 80% of respondents of Sefiani's **Sustainability Communications Survey** listed integrity as the number one trait of sustainability leadership. As author Simon Sinek memorably said, "The leader sets the tone, so integrity is everything." **Sinek** notes both integrity and courage are vital traits for leaders to navigate the new world order and break new ground.

02

Address the good and the bad

All (100%) of industry leaders interviewed for the Sefiani **Sustainability Communications Survey** said sustainability leaders should be honest with stakeholders about the challenges they face, including when they fall short. Being open and transparent about challenges and set-backs in a timely manner generates goodwill. A **2022 study** by Pino showed that consumers interpret the admission of challenges as a signal of transparency and tend to trust companies that voluntarily disclose setbacks.

03

Serialise storytelling

Tell the small stories by framing each moment as a step in the longer journey to drive momentum and mobilise all stakeholders behind one vision.

04

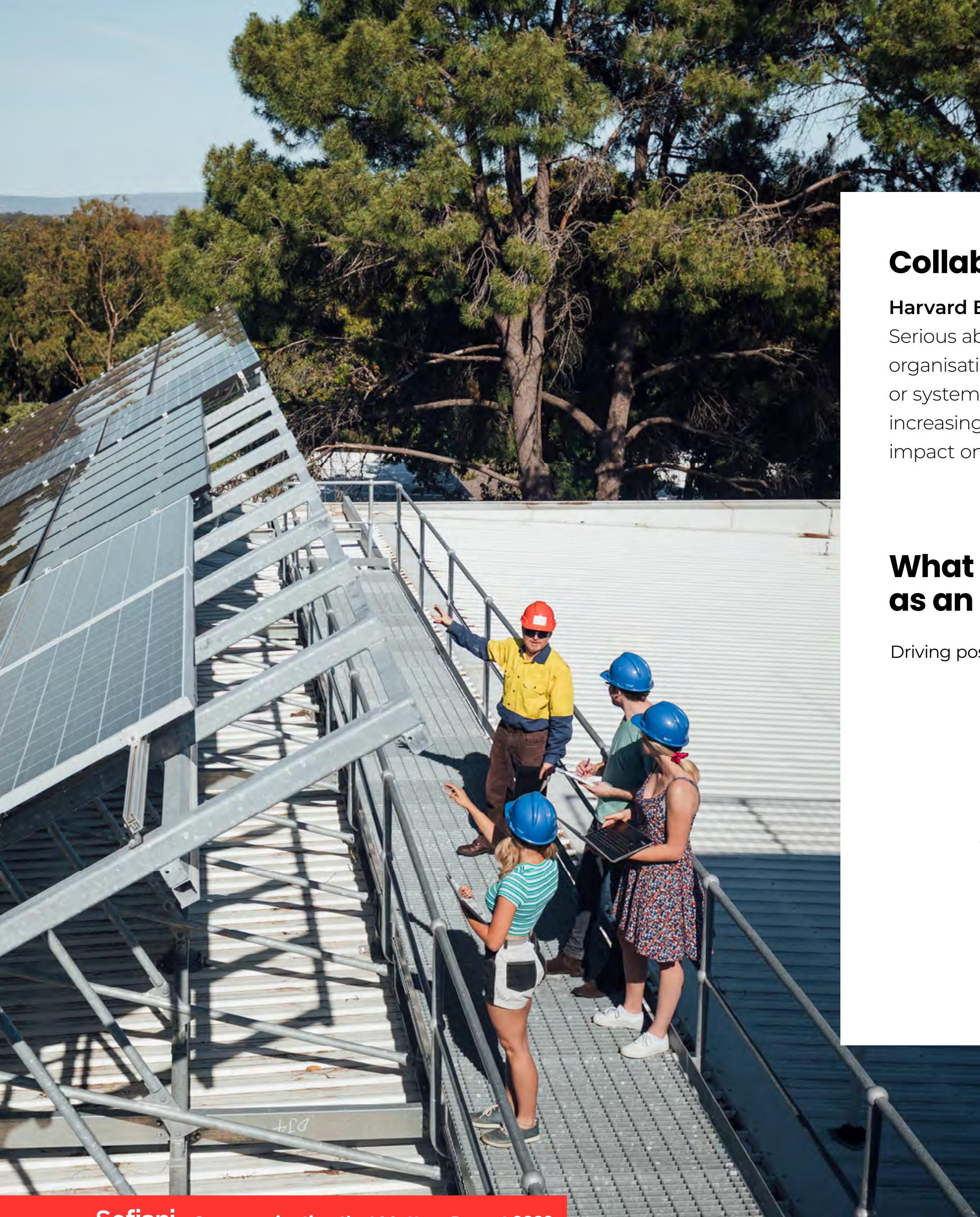
Be accountable and answer tough questions

Author and speechwriter Don Watson famously coined the term 'weasel words' for language commonly used by politicians and business leaders to give "the appearance of truth whilst protecting the speaker from attack or legal redress". Avoid weasel words by speaking clearly, directly and succinctly, and doing away with unnecessary jargon.

05

Inspire stakeholders

A leader who helps stakeholders understand and get excited about sustainability will be a magnet for talent, and a driver of real change. Understand what motivates individual stakeholder groups and directly address their concerns or highlight the benefits of your sustainability strategy as it relates to them. Finding this balance is where the inherent tension – and communications opportunity – resides.

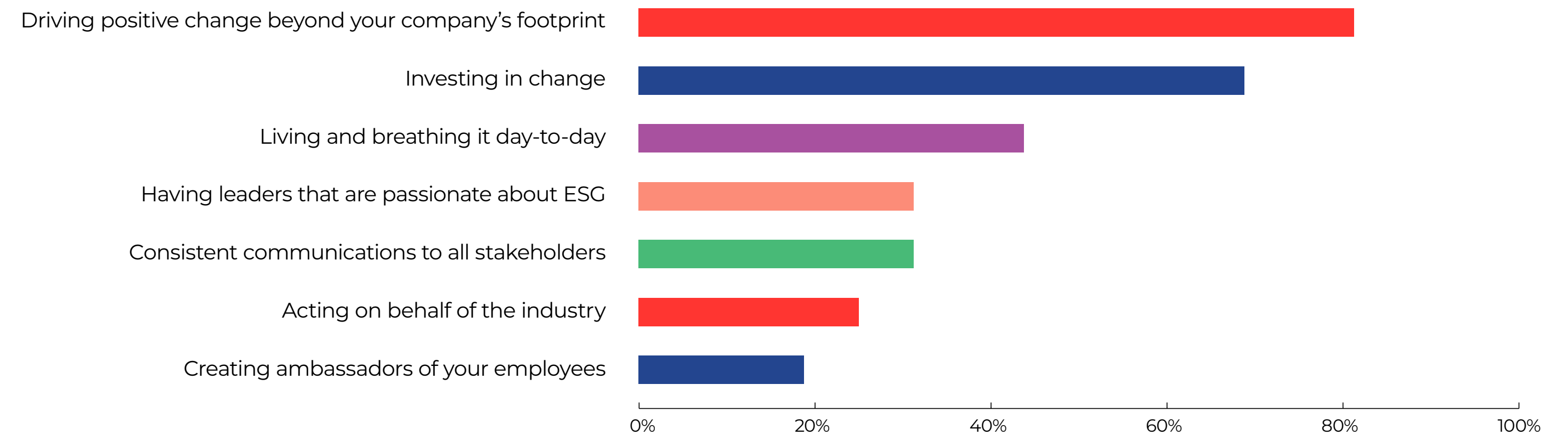


Collaboration trumps competition

Harvard Business Review's [Big Ideas Series](#) on Getting Serious about Stakeholder Capitalism encourages organisations to move from corporate goals to industry, or systems-levels goals, and posits that companies increasingly need to set stretch goals with regard to their impact on the environment and society.

Respondents to Sefiani's **Sustainability Communications Survey** agree, with 86% arguing that 'driving positive change beyond your company's footprint' is needed in order to be recognised as a sustainability leader. They identified a need to commit investment and resources that can help bring a whole industry forward, not just an individual company. One respondent noted: "A sustainability report is not enough – companies need to collaborate across the entire value chain".

What does it take to be recognised as an ESG leader?



In the HBR [Series](#), an expert panel admitted that without transformation of existing industry systems and supply chain processes, achieving positive change at scale is often prohibitively expensive or simply unachievable for individual companies. So what can organisations do? This is where partnerships and collaboration play an important role in driving actionable change.



Partnerships can take many forms. For some, it is high-level system change: For example, reducing global packaging and waste. Protecting human rights across supply chains, and ensuring gender equity in corporate organisations. Collaborations within the private sector are key in driving change in these areas where “collective action in the form of meaningful, transparent, industry-level work between competitors can turn aspirational corporate talk into substantial change,” according to [HBR](#).

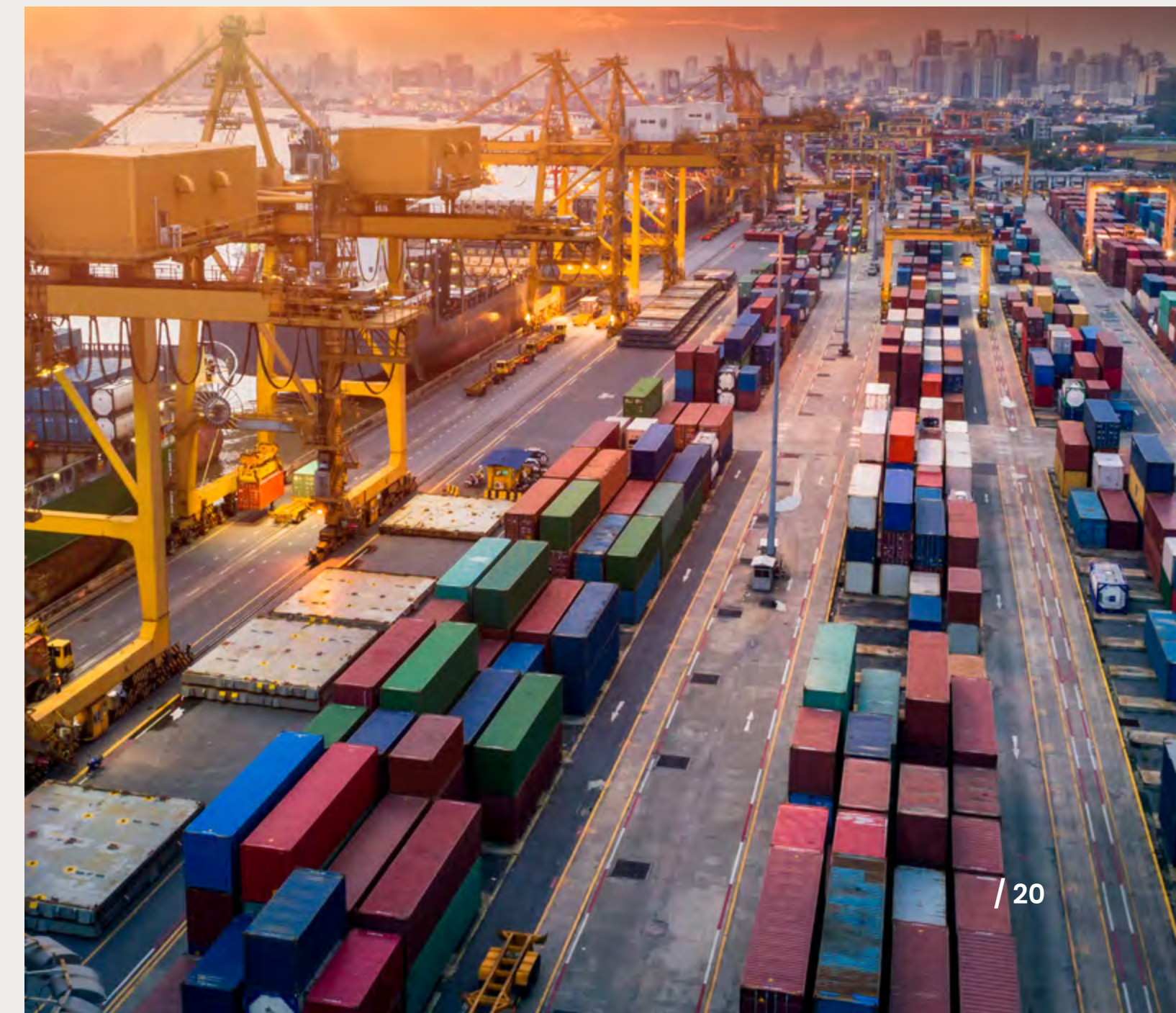
For others, partnering with NGOs or not-for-profit organisations who are experts in their area – be that innovative environmental organisations, or social enterprises driving change at a grassroots level – is a way to not only tap into expertise and collaborate on important initiatives, but bring credibility to their sustainability strategies, borrow and share brand equity, and reach a broader audience.

From a communications perspective, partnerships provide opportunities for more meaningful stories to bring a strategy to life – ranging from large-scale commitments to everyday practical solutions and human-interest stories. Audiences will see through and discount transactional partnerships motivated purely by commercial incentives; they will remember and engage with partnerships that feel genuine, have a clear shared vision, and drive actionable change.

CASE STUDY

Industry leadership

Global supply chains contain some of the most significant and difficult-to-reduce emissions. Last year, Mars knew that to achieve its own climate goals, it needed to help its suppliers and partners create their own science-based targets. It co-founded a coalition called the [Supplier Leadership on Climate Transition](#), aimed at driving industry-wide action through global supply chains. The coalition is a win-win, supporting smaller suppliers and partners to improve their approach to climate action, while accelerating progress towards the climate goals of its members.





Reframing sustainability to lead with optimism

Research by [McCann Worldgroup Truth Central](#), unveiled alongside COP26 in Glasgow, identified five 'macro-shifts' designed to help leaders and communicators drive greater understanding of sustainability and champion it to a broader, multi-generational audience.

The standout 'macro-shift' relates to the way sustainability is framed in communications and branding when speaking to the wider population. Technical, scientific language and targets are needed for specific channels, but this is not how most people typically relate to new topics.

"We talk endlessly about saving the environment, protecting the planet or lowering emissions, but what if we're talking about sustainability the wrong way? What if this discourse is actually hindering real progress?" asked Nadia Tuma-Weldon, SVP and director at McCann Worldgroup Truth Central.

Truth Central calls out the way sustainability has been framed in the media as a major issue: it's often about 'living with less', facing trade-offs and compromise for a future that is difficult to define.

Present bias, a concept in behavioural economics, refers to the tendency for human beings to find it difficult to sacrifice something now for a future they can't see.

A growing sense of negativity around sustainability can lead to a feeling of overwhelm, hopelessness, and paralysis. In reality, many smaller, successful climate measures will improve quality of life.

Sustainability communications provide the opportunity to shift the conversation. Tuma-Weldon says this is an opportunity to prompt stakeholders to answer a very important question, "How is this going to make my life better today?" Reframing communications to address what can be done to create a world people want to live in can be "joyful, elevated and beautiful," added Tuma-Weldon.

A balance must be struck between sharing an optimistic vision of the future and being honest about the challenges and speed bumps that will be faced along the way. Overstating the opportunity or exaggerating claims will lead to a loss of trust and reputational damage.

A photograph of two hands, one above the other, holding and pouring bright red soil. The top hand is cupped, and the bottom hand is also cupped, with a stream of soil falling from the top hand into the bottom one. The background is a blurred landscape of red earth and green trees under a blue sky.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

- Balancing the needs of all stakeholders is complex and contains risk. Communicating the actions being taken to achieve a sustainability strategy honestly and transparently is fundamental to meeting the expectations of all stakeholders.
- Partnerships provide content for rich storytelling by bringing the powerful ‘human element’ to a sustainability strategy. However, the success of communications will depend on the integrity of the partnership and the communications around it; the partnership needs to be more than borrowing equity or audiences for commercial purposes.
- Communicators should keep language around sustainability simple and accessible, without obscuring progress with jargon or overly-complex scientific language.
- Be cautious about narratives that imply constant trade-offs and sacrifice as the only path to progress on the climate crisis. Wherever possible and realistic, tap into positive visions of a future that people find aspirational, hopeful and motivational.
- Humanise the topic – translate issues and solutions from the technical to the human, in ways that make sense to people, in terms they can respond to, and which trigger positive action.



04 THE WAY FORWARD

Australia is on the cusp of great change as we usher in a new parliament elected with a mandate to take action on environmental and social issues. With this will come increasing pressure on business and leaders to do more, and demonstrate the impact they are having.

As communicators, we will play a central role in helping the organisations we work with, successfully create and articulate change. We will also need to maintain a critical eye on the strategies, tactics and messaging to ensure there is tangible action behind the words.

The strength of the strategy, the transparency of the story, and the integrity of business leaders will make or break companies in a world tired of empty promises and hungry for action.

It takes courage, integrity, and sustained effort. Companies must work hard to find their own 'North Star', uniting their brand purpose and sustainability goals to light their company's path to improving the world we live in.

It requires a great deal of integrity from organisations and their leaders to break new ground, make tough business decisions, and communicate their successes and failures honestly and transparently.

There are key questions to ask when faced with a decision about whether to communicate:

- How closely does this align with your strategy? Is this an important milestone and way to communicate your progress or challenges?
- Is the topic of interest or concern to stakeholders? And which stakeholders specifically? What is their level of understanding of the topic?
- How does this align to or exceed standards set by others within the industry, standards set by regulators, or existing policy?
- How might your biggest critics or activists respond?
- Do you have an existing record that needs to be considered or addressed before communicating?

As in all moments of huge progress and rapid change, storytelling will be crucial to the shift to a greener, more equitable world.

Sharing stories of progress and hope on sustainability will inspire, energise and connect our stakeholders, and take us forward together as agents of change for a sustainable future.



Sefiani

To discuss how we can help you become an agent of change and tell your sustainability story, contact our team at Sefiani.

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