

Getting Top Level Commitment

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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?

1. 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 tend 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.

2. 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 don't 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".

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.



3. 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? So 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.

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