

A Guide for Creating Effective Green Teams in Health Care

A Cultural Shift

The health community is no stranger to change. Hospitals are constantly faced with the challenge of how to effectively communicate and sustain change within the multitude of systems involved in delivering excellent patient care. When a healthcare organization commits to the concept of environmental sustainability it is embarking on a change in its culture as well. To be effective, a cultural change requires championship from the highest levels of an organization and is most successful when its purpose resonates with all staff levels. Creating a green hospital culture does not happen without leadership, coordination, education and accountability. The purpose of this guide is to provide insight and practical tips on how your organization can effectively manage and implement green operational initiatives.



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Benefits Beyond the Environment

■ Employee Satisfaction

Organizations with a demonstrated commitment to the environment appear to have a market advantage in recruitment and retention of employees. When it comes to attracting new hires, according to the 2007 *Corporate Environmental Behavior and the Impact on Brand Values* survey report on nearly 17,000 people in 15 countries, eighty-one percent of U.S. respondents said they would prefer to work for a company that has a good reputation for environmental responsibility.¹ When a workplace lacks an active commitment to reducing its impact on the environment, conscientious employees will find a disconnect between their conservation habits at home and work. Healthcare workers experience the overabundance of waste, and many want to actively participate in greening activities. According to a survey of employed adults conducted by research firm Harris Interactive for Randstad USA, a work solutions company, 93 percent of employed respondents conserve energy or turn off the television, computer and lights when leaving home for the day, but only half do the same when leaving work. And, considering that 81 percent of employees say they would prefer to work for an eco-friendly employer, the evidence of differing behaviors between work and home indicates management has an opportunity to improve employee engagement through environmental improvement strategies.²

Once an organization has attracted and is retaining employees with environmental enthusiasm, the challenge is to guide their energy into action – measurable results that support the hospital's goals and have the mutual benefit of being a highly satisfying experience for staff members. The psychological benefits of belonging to an organization whose values align with one's personal beliefs can pay off immensely in loyalty and productivity. Whether the work is done by a newly formed green team, or is integrated into an existing team or process, is not as important as ensuring the right mix of membership discipline and a structure of accountability for monitoring the team's work.

■ Community Benefit Reporting

Dedicating a team to manage your organization's environmental improvements sends a positive message to the community you serve, and is the first step in creating tangible environmental improvements. Effective in 2009 for tax year 2008, the IRS will require non-profit organizations to describe activities that demonstrate "community building activities," including environmental improvements.³ Under the guidance of a focused team approach, results of green operations activities are easily tracked and reported. Notable achievements facilitated by the team and implemented organization-wide will provide a source for community benefit reporting in the future for all types of healthcare organizations, regardless of tax status.

■ Cost Savings

Good old fashioned **expense reduction** can help a green team gain credibility and resources as it implements **conservation and waste minimization** initiatives, such as energy conservation, recycling and improved waste segregation. Determining cost reduction opportunities through analysis of baseline information is often job number one for a green team. Training and educational activities sponsored by the green team can be coordinated with appropriate departments to implement and achieve waste reduction goals, raising the bar over time. Conservation of natural resources can be promoted through evaluation of industry best practices for potential implementation, such as green energy procurement, installation of water efficiency measures, recycling programs, etc. Promotional events facilitated by a green team have the power to increase awareness and a sense of individual responsibility that can translate into an “eco-conscious” mentality and careful consumption of resources among staff. It’s simple: a culture of conservation saves precious financial and irreplaceable environmental assets.

■ Environmental Goal Achievement

As hospitals continually seek ways to differentiate themselves to their patients in increasingly competitive markets, going green has positive public relations benefits. Excellent, quality patient care takes on a new dimension when an organization commits to the health of the environment because it understands human health is dependent on it. Being recognized for achievements in environmental responsibility is a whole new way to emerge as a health care industry thought-leader, and is an opportunity to shape an organization’s image of excellence as healers and protectors of health.

■ Improved Quality and Safety

Staff and patient safety are often enhanced through the work of green teams. For example, reduction in sharps injuries can be a benefit of converting to reusable sharps containers due to a superior opening size and automatic locking feature. Providing a healthier work environment can lead to increased staff and patient satisfaction. Nurses are over twice as likely to suffer from occupational asthma, compared to the rest of the population, according to a study of more than 6,800 people from 13 countries.⁴ The study also found that conditions in the workplace may be causing up to 25 percent of new cases of asthma in the developed world. Eliminating toxic chemicals and cleansers has obvious quality of care benefits for patients with weakened immune systems as well. Replacing them with environmentally preferred and equally efficacious products requires a concerted effort represented by disciplines of expertise (i.e., Infection Control, Environmental Services) participating on a green team or Environment of Care team to evaluate, test and convert these products in a methodical manner.

Launching and Sustaining a Green Team: 10 Key Steps

① Establish Leadership Advocacy

Senior management endorsement of environmental stewardship is essential. A top-down and bottom-up management approach to greening is the ideal prescription for success. If the concept is not coming from the highest level of the organization, start by creating strategy to establish a business case for greening (refer to Practice Greenhealth’s, *The Business Case for Greening the Health Care Sector*) and/or the social cost of not pursuing more environmentally responsible operations. Look to the organization’s mission, values and current strategic priorities for meaningful links.

Start by making a business case for environmental improvements, such as cost savings, reduced energy and water consumption, reduced safety risks for patients and staff and evidence-based green building design standards. Whether a senior manager or administrator is championing the cause or a mid-level manager is taking the lead, it is important to treat the greening initiative like any other business strategy—by communicating its importance alongside all the competing priorities being juggled in healthcare every day.

Work groups and teams will perform better if they are rooted in an organizational culture that encourages high performance.⁵ To avoid the common problems associated with team failure, such as teams that start out rapidly but lose momentum, a lack of organizational support, or intra or inter-team conflict, leaders have a responsibility to do the following:

- Clearly define the team’s relevance to the organization’s mission and priorities
- Establish a steering committee or senior reporting structure, with appropriate support
- Understand and work to enhance team effectiveness by reviewing recommended resources. (See Appendix B)
- Support innovation
- Expect success
- Value superior quality and service
- Pay attention to detail
- Value team recommendations
- Have very clear goals that are **SMART**: **S**pecific, **M**easurable (and monitored over project timeline), **A**chievable, **R**ealistic (based on reality & useful data) and **T**ime-bound⁶
- Reward teamwork rather than individual performance
- Identify synergies between environmental team goals and existing organizational projects/initiatives

② Create a Multi-Disciplinary Team

Integral to effective implementation of green initiatives is a team of individuals representing a variety of disciplines. Start by identifying a leader within the organization under whom the responsibility for forming and running a green team lies. In faith-based organizations, this may be a vice president of mission and ethics. In a hospital or other facility setting, this may be a leader within the ranks of operations, such as a director of Environmental Services, Safety or Facilities. Some organizations realize great success by capitalizing on the strength of an existing team, such as an Environment of Care team, to assume responsibility for initiating and directing the implementation of green operations changes. Accountability and reporting structure are more important in the long run than the exact mix of expertise on a green team (See Figure 1). Reporting environmental improvements and resulting community benefit to the hospital's board of directors, community leaders, and the like, indicate how the team's accountability can reach beyond the internal stakeholders into the public realm.

Internal and External stakeholders:

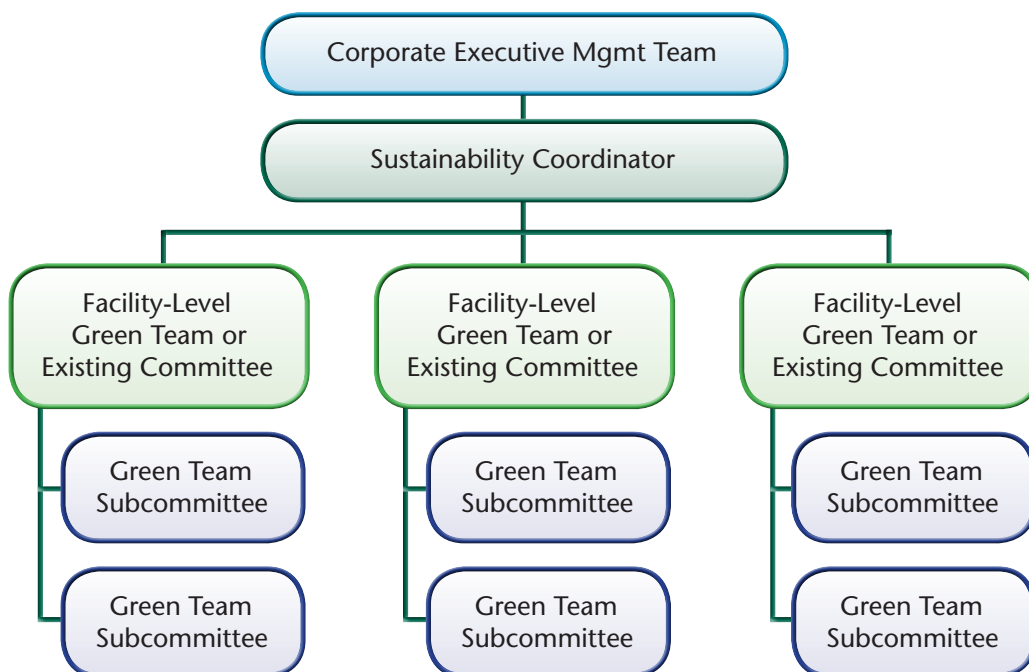
- Board of Directors
- Internal teams: Facilities, EH&S, Engineering
- State agencies
- Municipalities
- Community Benefit or Outreach Office
- NGOs and Sustainability community

The emergence of a new role, the Sustainability Coordinator, is an effective structural reporting change intended to enhance accountability and commitment. If granted the authority within the organization, the Sustainability Coordinator is a leadership position poised to shepherd, educate, analyze, and motivate individual hospital facilities to adopt environmentally friendly operations. Often this role is assumed as an added responsibility within the scope of an existing position within the organization. The formation of green team subcommittees serve as work groups who champion and manage the implementation of operational initiatives.

A key champion is often found within the medical staff. A physician and/or nurse champion is a valuable asset to have in the board room or the CEO suite, as well as among their peers. Once executive support for sustainability is in place, all hospital managers should be aware of the call to action to create a green team, and be willing to make referrals for membership from their staff. Building the base of your team requires rallying support for the new team by seeking individuals with passion for the work—and by bringing in the right mix of expertise and functional disciplines. Turn their enthusiasm into participation. The size of the team should generally be limited to the smallest number of members necessary to accomplish its goals, without sacrificing the diversity necessary to achieve quality results in a clinical environment. A sample team membership is represented in Appendix A.

FIGURE 1

Sample Green Team reporting structure within a multi- hospital system



③ Create a Team Mission

Whether starting with a new team or incorporating responsibility for operational green initiatives into an existing team it is wise to state the purpose of the work to maintain focus. Understanding and acceptance of the mission by the members of the team, hospital staff, patients and visitors fosters cooperation and compliance. A mission statement provides clarity about why the work is worthy of support and helps it compete with and complement other priorities in a hospital setting. Keep it simple yet meaningful. A mission can echo the overarching values at the core of your particular culture and the health care industry at large, including stewardship, ecology, care of creation, and health and healing of the environment and the people it serves. Symbolism is a powerful communication tool especially as it concerns large groups of people. Developing a logo for the team is not only an exercise in developing an organizational identity, it is also a meaningful activity for the team as they gel and form unity. (See Figure 2)

FIGURE 2

Sample green team mission and logo

Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital
Downers Grove, IL



Green Team Mission:
**To reduce the impact of healthcare operations
on the environment and human health.**



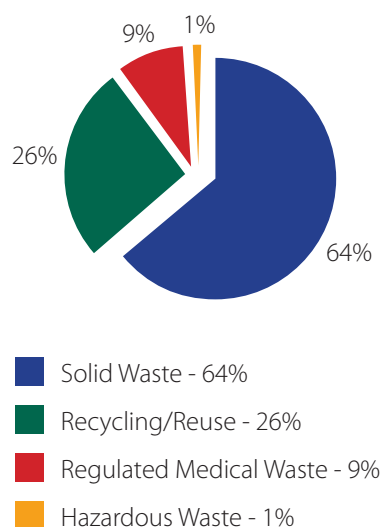
④ Perform a Needs Assessment

Develop a clear picture of the hospital's sustainability green initiatives to help identify opportunities for improvement. Start by completing Practice Greenhealth's eco-check-list, to help organize and stimulate the team's ability to prioritize, plan and implement change. Potential priorities include environmentally preferable purchasing, waste reduction, mercury elimination, recycling, electronics management, sustainable building standards and natural resource conservation. Gathering data will help the team set goals and track progress. Baseline waste and material data is the basis for creating a measurable metric of what percentage of material is recycled, and further, can be adjusted for patient volume. (See Fig 3) The data becomes

the foundation for evaluating cost savings opportunities, goal setting and benchmarking your facility's performance across hospitals within a system—regionally or nationally.

FIGURE 3

2007 Annual Waste Stream Data University of Washington Medical Center Seattle, WA



⑤ Conduct Dynamic and Productive Meetings

Getting on with the task of assigning responsibility for performing the needs assessment, data gathering, and the numerous green initiatives in progress, the team must organize themselves to effectively accomplish the work before them. Plan a kick off meeting for new members to review the organizational commitment and mission to the environment. Invite the executive sponsor (i.e., President/CEO) to attend the first meeting or to join an existing team meeting to personally reiterate the commitment and inspire the group. In preparing for the meeting, seek guidance from Practice Greenhealth for resources to assist in framing the rationale behind the work of the team and ongoing support. Review the roles each member will play as they relate to their professional expertise. Mature highly effective teams exhibit the following characteristics⁷:

- Members are clear about and agree with the team's goals
- Role assignments match members' abilities
- The leadership style matches the team's development level
- The team gets, gives and utilizes feedback about its effectiveness and productivity
- The team spends time collaboratively defining and discussing problems it must solve or decisions it must make

- Team norms encourage high performance, quality, success, and innovation
- Subgroups are integrated into the team thoughtfully, in ways that ensure effectiveness and keep groups at manageable sizes (5-10 members)
- The team is highly cohesive and cooperative

Frequency of meetings should be sufficient to develop a mature working unit and to accomplish the team's goals (i.e., bi-weekly). Effective agendas and preparatory materials will enhance productivity, reduce stress, and enable already-busy professionals to feel their time and effort is valued. Responsibility for setting the agenda should be clear, with team input into topic suggestions. Tips for staying on track and maintaining accountability for pending action items can be addressed by considering the following:

- Who is doing what,
- By when,
- Using which resources and/or techniques and tools,
- For what reasons/benefits.

Team leaders should encourage empowerment of team members, spend time listening to their first-hand experiences especially as it relates to the challenges of implementing operational change as well as their successes.

⑥ Prioritize and Maintain Momentum!

"How do we decide what to do first, or next?" is a common question from green teams. As the group begins to review the outcome of the needs assessment or receives specific directives from leadership, a collective process for setting priorities is in order. When deliberating where the greatest need is and which initiatives to start with, consider the following:

Ease of completion – What early success can help build momentum and engender support and enthusiasm?

Cost savings – Which reductions in energy, waste disposal, medical supplies, and countless other operational expenses might contribute the most to financial goals?

Visibility – What will best serve to raise awareness, reduce waste, and begin to change individual's behaviors, attitudes and habits?

Regulatory Compliance and Safety – How might doing the 'right thing' for environmental health align closely with the 'safe thing' for patients, staff and visitors? Or where may the organization be at risk of non-compliance with environmental or safety regulations if problem areas are not addressed?

Environmental Impact – What are the highest leverage opportunities to reduce health care's environmental footprint, e.g. eliminating mercury, reducing chemical toxicity, leveraging purchasing power to influence manufacturers to offer environmentally preferable products, etc? Often times an assessment

of the various opportunities will reveal a special connection that makes one high leverage action easier to implement than others. "We have a funder interested in greening activities" or "That new building's heating and cooling plant could be sized to take care of this old building too, freeing up space and money" are examples of these opportunities.

It is easy to get off track, to want to do it all, and become disillusioned and overwhelmed. Be patient, and stay on course. Stay mindful that this is a work in progress and small successes build on each other. Sustainable change often occurs slowly but steadily.

⑦ Create and Monitor Measurable Goals

A significant function of the green team is to be the originator and keeper of the organization's environmental goals. The foundation for goal setting is the baseline information gathered during the needs assessment. Essential characteristics of successful goals include the following:

Measurable – define the goal in terms of 'how much' and 'by when'

Accountable – define 'who' on the team and within the organization is responsible for managing and reporting on the goal

Strategic – define tactics or action plan updates on how the goal is to be accomplished and provide regularly schedule updates reported at green team meetings and to leadership

If your organization conducts annual goal setting to drive annual performance evaluations, consider incorporating environmental goals into the process. Goals with a green motivation are often easily adaptable to organizational key result areas related to quality, patient and employee satisfaction, or financial performance, or even physician relations.

⑧ Communicate, Educate and Celebrate!

Use the power of public relations and green success stories to differentiate your organization in the health care market and community. To engage and sustain interest and cooperation from hospital leadership, board of directors, staff, patients and visitors requires a deliberate and meaningful communication plan. This is the primary role of the public relations or media representative on the team. Media coverage of special events spotlighting the cultural importance of preserving the environment can be published in newsletters, posted on organizational intranets, posters, leadership meetings, etc. Special events range from celebrating Earth Day or America Recycles Day to facility-specific human resource events such as new employee orientation. Take these opportunities, or create new ones to showcase green initiatives by demonstrating details about a new recycling program or promoting conservation habits (i.e., turning off computer and office lights at end of

day). Or make it a two-way dialogue by inviting “green operations” ideas from staff.

Seek national recognition from Practice Greenhealth’s Environmental Excellence Awards program. Use the recognition as a catalyst for celebrating the whole organization’s accomplishment. Publicly express gratitude to the team and individual staff who make significant contributions to the success and goal achievement, and share credit with powerful stakeholders who can support the effort. Seek media support to publish accomplishments internally and externally to spread word to the community of your hospital’s commitment to the environment.

9 Evaluate Your Team’s Effectiveness

How do you know if all this work is really making a difference? Ask yourselves if you are meeting and exceeding annual environmental goals, whether leadership is plugged in and supportive, and whether green team meetings are well attended and productive. Measure how far your work has come by conducting an annual needs assessment and compare it to the initial assessment. Compare the baseline data to the current actual data and track savings results – long term and short term. If necessary, change team membership either through attrition or intentionally via requests from staff who display an interest in joining or via strategic recruitment. Find out if pockets of the organization are still not aware of the environmental commitment by seeking opinions—formally through a short survey and anecdotally via casual conversations with employees and visitors—of their impressions of effectiveness for the organization’s sustainability efforts.

10 Be Ready for Barriers and Challenges

Keep in mind not everyone in the organization may be on board and some may even attempt to thwart the efforts of the team. As is typical with any change, there will be resistance. The changes will not always be convenient for people. Creating opportunities for others to participate (i.e., in proper segregation of waste) has to be balanced with effective management. Accept imperfect progress, as long as it’s progress. Don’t make the *perfect* the enemy of the *better*. Avoid and overcome the apathy that often creeps into this kind of work – that it is too difficult to really make a difference. Diverse green teams are effective for continuous environmental improvements, but the amount of work involved cannot be underestimated. Continuous rejuvenation of the committee, through term limits can help maintain energy and enthusiasm. For faster and significant environmental progress, we see the emergence of a dedicated position such as a “Sustainability Coordinator” to provide complete focus, leadership and attention to environmental efforts. See Appendix B for a sample job description reference.

Conducting business as usual when it comes to visible and invisible environmental hazards is not good enough in the health care sector anymore. Considering the cumulative environmental and human health effects of how hospitals deliver care should be a function for which every decision maker in a healthcare setting should be accountable. Achieving and surpassing financial, environmental, quality and safety goals is possible with a multi-faceted strategy that includes evaluating “how we’ve always done things”, and undertaking new inquiries that seek safer, healthier ways to do things, now and for the future.

The *Have Mercy on the Earth* Program impacts everyone at our hospital. Establishing a Green Team is an effective way to reach out to everyone and obtain hospital-wide participation and input into greening initiatives. Using a team approach allows our stakeholders to be involved early in planning of programmatic goals and objectives, which is key to the success of our program. Our team has encountered hurdles along the way; however, we have had many successes and our data reflects that. Our team will continue to evolve, but it will remain the driving force behind our program.

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APPENDIX A: Sample Green Team Membership Roster

Nursing • Physicians • Environmental Services • Materials Management
Public Relations • Food & Nutrition • Pharmacy • Facilities • Laboratory
Risk Management • Guest Services • Engineering • Infection Control

Note: An effective green team membership should be diversely represented and be manageable in size (5-10 people). The formation of subgroups designed to address specific initiatives (e.g., reusable sharps containers or green cleansers, etc.) and/or within departments (e.g., operating room or pharmacy) is an efficient and productive way to manage multiple green initiatives concurrently. Subgroups also present an opportunity for increased staff involvement which can translate to a deeper penetration of ownership and buy-in of environmental improvement opportunities throughout the organization.

APPENDIX B: Additional Resources

Wheelan, S., (2005). *Creating Effective Teams: A Guide for Members and Leaders* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc

Holpp, L., (1999), *Managing Teams*. Madison, WI: McGraw-Hill by CWL Publishing Enterprises, Inc.

Northeast Sustainable Energy Association (NESEA) Green Teamwork Project: Researching and Supporting Massachusetts Teams Creating High-Performance Buildings, <http://www.practicegreenhealth.org/tools/toolkit/#greenteam>

Practice Greenhealth website: <http://www.practicegreenhealth.org/>

Green Guide for Health Care website: <http://www.gghc.org/>

Health Care Without Harm website: <http://www.noharm.org/>

Global Health and Safety Initiative: <http://www.globalhealthsafety.org/>

For samples of Green Team Logos, Environmental Mission Statements, Sustainability Coordinator Job Description, and Sample Green Team Meeting Agenda go to: www.practicegreenhealth.org/tools/toolkit/#greenteam

Endnotes

- 1 Society for Human Resource Management, June 2008, Vol. 53, No.6
- 2 Society for Human Resource Management, June 2008, Vol. 53, No.6
- 3 http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/highlights_schedule_h.pdf
- 4 Manolis Kogevinas, et al The Lancet - Vol. 370, Issue 9584, 28 July 2007, Pages 336-341
- 5 Wheelan, S., (2005). *Creating Effective Teams: A Guide for Members and Leaders* (2nd ed.), p 8. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- 6 <http://www.topachievement.com/smart.html>
- 7 Wheelan, S., (2005). *Creating Effective Teams: A Guide for Members and Leaders* (2nd ed.), p 40. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.



Practice Greenhealth is the nation's leading membership and networking organization for institutions in the healthcare community that have made a commitment to sustainable, eco-friendly practices. Members include hospitals, healthcare systems, businesses and other stakeholders engaged in the greening of healthcare to improve the health of patients, staff and the environment.

Learn more at www.practicegreenhealth.org