



A Collaboration Framework for Environmental Sustainability

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Communities today face many challenges, including poverty, climate change, inequality, and polluted air and water. To tackle these challenges, we need to develop cultures and practices that protect and enhance the natural environment on which we depend. Organizations are an excellent site for change. They are often small enough for individuals and groups to have a say in how they operate, and yet big enough for changes to make a real difference. Our study shows how a sustainability culture can be built and maintained by supporting the people in an organisation who want to make a difference.



Figure 1 Solar panels installed by the partnerships. Photograph permission received from the school.

We describe an 11-year partnership between ourselves as Community Psychologists and Western Springs College/Ngā Puna O Waiōrea (WSCW) a public, co-educational high school in Aotearoa New Zealand. Based on our findings, we propose a novel “people-focused systems approach” that combines complex systems thinking with the values and expertise of Community Psychology, to promote sustainability at an organizational level.

Highlights

A people-focused approach is a new framework for working within or alongside organizations to bring about sustainability-related changes.

Community Psychologists can work beside people within an organization to support them as they embed a sustainability culture.

For 11 years, we worked in partnership with WSCW to get environmental sustainability underway. To do this, we established a network of student leaders, teachers, managers, university researchers, and supporters from the city council and local community, and co-created projects to promote sustainability in all areas of school life. The projects included a fully separated waste system, regular eco-events such as stream planting, clothes swaps, sustainable cooking and fashion shows, new teaching units, and the promotion of walking and cycling.

As Community Psychologists, we focused on supporting people and helping the students design projects that would draw in their peers and create a

"culture of sustainability". The sustainability network and culture are still going strong at the school, with many new initiatives, including solar panels, since we concluded our research. We suggest a "people-focused approach" like this can be used in most organizations and has great potential to raise awareness and create change.

Methods

We interviewed 23 key people involved in sustainability efforts at the school and analyzed the minutes of 46 meetings of the school's Sustainability Panel. We used a novel evaluation approach to map what we call the "sustainable social system" at the school. Our case study focused on the features of the school's sustainability culture as well as the conditions that encouraged it to emerge.

Results

- Sustainability culture grew over an 11-year journey and has come to be a key part of the way the school works on a daily basis.
- It is possible to promote environmental sustainability in an organization by bringing together, and working with, the people who care.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

As Community Psychologists, we brought people together to create change. We saw ourselves as companions rather than experts, documenting and assisting with a process that was largely generated by members of the larger partnership. We focused on supporting people, helping them design projects, and measuring outcomes in ways that were useful to their learning and ours.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Action is best taken by the people within a system. Outsiders, such as Community Psychologists, can help support and document change.

Practice: Our work provides a clear structure for organizational change. We call this a "people-focused systems approach". It starts with creating a network of people who want to be involved and generating projects. These projects increase the visibility of environmental sustainability, and over time may become part of the organization's essential operations.

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