

Case Study: It's Good to Talk! Carbon Conversations

It's good to talk (reproduced here with kind permission of The Environmentalist Online Magazine)
Becky Allen reports on a scheme developed to help community groups explore low-carbon living that is now increasingly being used in workplaces.

Covering the same issues as the community version, workplace Carbon Conversations focus on the changes individuals can make and opportunities to reduce carbon emissions across an organisation, with the final session creating an action plan for the group's sponsor. The initiative has already been used by Buckinghamshire County Council, the Southern Cooperative, the University of Edinburgh and the Scottish Parliament, which ran two groups in 2010 and 2011.

"We have very ambitious 2020 targets to reduce our carbon footprint by 42%, our electricity usage by 40% and to only send 5% of our waste to landfill," says David Fairhurst, environment performance manager at the Scottish parliament: "We recognise that staff behaviour and employee engagement are key to meeting those goals."

The sessions at the parliament were classed as formal training and ran during working hours. All the participants were volunteers, which Fairhurst believes is essential. "I sat down and wrote a list of people I thought might be interested, including those in our environment management working group. I also asked office heads who they would recommend. The first group was a pilot. We aimed for a mix of participants to see how different people responded to it."

Workplace issues identified by the groups were relayed to Fairhurst, who either addressed them himself or passed them up the management chain. "If it was a minor thing, I'd help people implement it. The more challenging issues were taken to the environment management steering group," he explains. Jenny Goldsmith, a clerk on the European and external relations committee and a volunteer coordinator for the parliament's Real Action on Climate Emissions (RACE) programme, took part in the second Carbon Conversations group. "I found it really interesting. It's a very different format, much more conversational than simply being sat there and given information," she says

"The discussion format is interesting, it opens up members of the group and helps people learn from each other. Also the games used are very accessible," she says. "It suited me as a person, and I think everyone in the group got something out of it. Many followed up on the work and did something positive afterward. It really resonated with people – it got into their heads."

Other participants reported feeling more involved, inspired and empowered, as well as more informed. As a result, several became more involved with RACE and ideas the group generated led to changes in recycling at the parliament building.

"We've completely changed our recycling facilities in offices," Fairhurst says. "We've removed individual bins and replaced them with recycling hubs to encourage people to separate their waste. Our recycling rates are now very high – around 80% – and we've cut our landfill waste by almost 70% over the past four to five years."

Fairhurst and Goldsmith both believe Carbon Conversations has contributed to a wider cultural change in the parliament. "What we really learned and built on was the benefit of holding meetings where people can



Sustainability, step by step

discuss things and voice opinions, not just receive information. We learned a lot about trying to understand why people behave in certain ways, and that's informed our RACE programme," says Fairhurst.

The Scottish parliament has organised a range of environment events, from after-work bird watching to wildflower planting. "The original vision for the parliament was to link it into the land and in particular the wild space of Arthur's Seat [the main peak of the group of hills that forms most of Holyrood Park, close to the parliament building]," says Goldsmith. "We have a partnership with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, which has permission to take seeds from Arthur's Seat. Parliament staff have germinated the seeds and planted them around the parliament building to give biodiversity a helping hand."

Engaging staff

According to Fairhurst, what works best to change behaviour is using a wide variety of events to engage as many staff as possible: "What we're trying to do is find things that appeal to a range of people. We hope they will then do things at work to help us be a more sustainable organisation."

As a result, although it's hard to attribute specific changes to individual initiatives, Fairhurst believes Carbon Conversations – along with RACE and the parliament's eco-network – is creating culture change throughout the parliament.

"Without initiatives like Carbon Conversations, it would be harder to get environment policy through and encourage people to accept it," he says. "The culture feels more open now to doing the right thing."

Carbon Conversations has opened up dialogue that has helped the parliament learn, Goldsmith concludes. "It's been part of our environmental evolution," she says.

"We've refined how we do things as a result, we've learned and changed our approach. Carbon Conversations is not a panacea, but it is another tool to use and it will help you learn how to do things better and how to get the environment message to become part of the corporate norm."