Internal Sustainability Communication and the Influence on Corporate Culture: A Qualitative Survey of Sustainable Companies in Germany

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Internal Sustainability Communication and the Influence on Corporate Culture

A Qualitative Survey of Sustainable Companies in Germany

Simona Gulich, Tammo Heinemann, Emma Starke, Franziska Wehr, Leonie Weiß

Abstract

Nowadays, sustainability is becoming increasingly important not only in society but also in companies. The objective of this study is to determine the potential of internal sustainability communication in shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies. The research questions are dedicated to the goals, measures, and effects of internal sustainability communication with regard to Corporate Culture. To answer these questions, 15 qualitative expert interviews were conducted. A ranking of the 200 most sustainable companies in Germany was chosen as a sample to recruit the interview partners. The study was able to identify diverse potentials of internal sustainability communication with regard to shaping Corporate Culture. When considering the three dimensions of sustainability, it became clear that ecological and social sustainability are increasingly dealt with, while the economic dimension is neglected. This study shows that internal sustainability communication can positively influence the Corporate Culture as a whole and ultimately also individual employees in their attitudes and actions with regard to sustainability issues. However, the potential identified must be considered in the context of the individual Corporate Culture, such as the structural and personnel premises, to be able to discuss the extent to which the potential can be exploited in the best possible way. This study provides starting points for further research in this dynamic field as well as practical insights for application in employee communication.

Keywords: Internal Sustainability Communication, Corporate Culture, Triple Bottom Line, Sustainable Companies, Employee Communication

Introduction

"Sustainability must be one of the most widely used buzzwords of the past two decades" (Scoones, 2007, p. 589).

As this quote illustrates, almost anything can be described as sustainable or associated with sustainability these days. "We have sustainable cities, economies, resource management, business, livelihoods - and, of course, sustainable development" (Scoones, 2007, p. 589). Hence, sustainability assumes a pivotal role in society, with the understanding that life for future generations is only feasible through sustainable development (Ernst, 2022, p. 14). However, there is no consensus in society as a whole on what exactly is meant by sustainability. Additionally, the fact that the topic of sustainability is far more complex than it appears at first glance, even from a corporate perspective. This is shown, among other concepts by the *Triple Bottom Line of Sustainability* (TBL) defined by Scoones (2007), which encompasses the three dimensions of ecology, economy, and social issues, and thus narrows down and clearly defines sustainability.

As research on sustainability in a corporate context makes clear that the specific field of sustainability communication is gaining in importance, paying tribute to the ever-increasing relevance of sustainability in terms of corporate communication as well (Fischer et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). However, not only the topic of sustainability, but also the area of internal corporate communication has gained relevance in research and practice in recent years. Despite this, there has been little research at the interface between internal communication and sustainability communication, or it

ends to focus on internal branding strategies in the context of sustainability communication (Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016). The research in this field is predominantly dominated by qualitative and

quantitative studies on external sustainability communication (Borkowski, Welsh & Wentzel, 2012). In light of this, this research project aims to bring about a shift in perspective by directing its focus towards internal

sustainability communication within sustainable companies, instead of the usual emphasis on external sustainability communication.

Derived from these values and norms, a consideration of Corporate Culture in the context of internal sustainability communication is also relevant. The aim of this thesis is to answer the following overarching research question:

RQ: What potential does internal sustainability communication offer for shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies?.

To answer the research questions, 15 qualitative expert interviews were conducted with communicators from the middle and upper management levels of the 200 most sustainable companies in Germany (Statista commissioned by Stern, 2022), followed by a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2016). The results illustrate that the participation and activation of all employees is crucial for achieving sustainability goals. Another finding is that the internal sustainability communication measures taken, such as events or town hall meetings, have a lasting impact on the Corporate Culture. The impact of internal sustainability communication on Corporate Culture is also shown by a strengthening of already existing values with regard to sustainability or a further development of existing corporate values, which then also include sustainable aspects. The study thus focuses on the general objectives of the communicators, the measures already taken regarding sustainability communication, and observable effects on Corporate Culture. Finally, the results are discussed, recommendations for action are derived, and the limitations and implications of this study for future research and corporate communications are explained.

Literature Review

Sustainability as Part of Corporate Communications

When looking at the theory, it becomes clear that the topic of sustainability is becoming increasingly important in the context of corporate

communications. For a company to achieve long-term success, sustainability must be incorporated into corporate thinking in the form of integration into strategies and practices (Craig, 2013, p. 292). John Elkington (1998) defines sustainability from a business perspective using the TBL (see Figure 1). According to this, sustainability consists of the three dimensions of ecology, economy, and social (Elkington, 1998, p. 19). This is also accompanied by sustainability communication, which deals with various sustainability topics and can be classified as a task or instrument in the company (Fischer et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). In the corporate context, it is described by the term Corporate Sustainability Communication, as introduced by Signitzer and Prexl (2007, p. 2). Corporate success is deemed truly sustainable only when all three dimensions of sustainability are duly considered. It is through this comprehensive approach that the desired level of legitimacy can be attained among all stakeholders (Schaltegger, 2011). These stakeholders serve as the recipients of sustainability communication, and it is imperative to engage and educate them across diverse social, economic, and ecological domains.

Figure 1

Triple Bottom Line according to Elkington (1998)
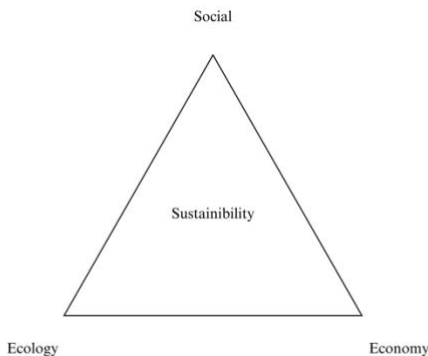
A fundamental aspect of sustainability communication in relation to its stakeholder relations is internal communication within the company. In this context, internal sustainability communication represents a subarea of internal communication (Bolton, Kim & O'Gorman, 2011, p. 61). Its function is to communicate company-related sustainability issues from the three areas of sustainability (Crane & Matten, 2007, p. 29) and the associated values and norms (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011, p. 6) to all internal stakeholders and creating a common understanding about them (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 184). Crucial stakeholders in this area are the employees, as they produce, consume, and communicate sustainability knowledge (Kataria, Kataria & Garg, 2013, p. 47).

In addition to internal sustainability communication, there are also companies that identify themselves through sustainability based on the TBL. According to Errichiello and Zschiesche (2022), these companies should commit to *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) as a form of corporate responsibility in which ecological as well as social aspects are included in economic concerns and decisions from the very beginning (pp. 17-57). In principle, there is as of now no uniform definition of sustainable companies. However, there is a broad consensus on the inclusion of the three sustainability dimensions (Errichiello & Zschiesche, 2021). Accordingly, the task of sustainable corporate management is to pursue goals of the ecological, economic as well as social dimensions while achieving a balanced relationship (Souren, 2016, p. 135).

Interplay between Corporate Culture and Internal Communication

However, sustainable companies are not only characterized by the observance of the TBL but are also characterized by a special Corporate Culture as an informal and mainly immaterial part of the company. Corporate Culture can be divided into three levels according to Schein (2010, p. 4). The top level are artifacts, which appear as visible and tangible structures and processes and include symbols and signs. At the second level are the beliefs and values held, which include ideals, goals, ideologies, or rationalizations. On the third and last level, Schein describes

the basic assumptions, which exist unconsciously and naturally (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Three levels of Corporate Culture according to Schein (2010)

1. Artifacts
- Visible and tangible structures and processes
- Observed behavior, which is often difficult to decipher

2. Represented Beliefs and Values
- Ideas, goals, values and aspirations
- Ideologies
- Rationalizations that may or may not be congruent on behavior and other artifacts

3. Basic assumptions

Unconscious, taken-for-granted-beliefs and values, such as:
- Certain behavior
- Perception
- Thinking
- Feeling

According to Sackmann (2021), there is a dynamic and reinforcing interplay between Corporate Culture and internal communication (pp. 79-116). Based on this assumption, Bauschke (2014) argues that sustainable companies in particular need a Corporate Culture that appropriately establishes the idea of sustainability (p. 179). He also argues that as soon as sustainability is an essential value of a company, it should also be reflected in the perception and actions of the organization's members and thus in the Corporate Culture (p. 179).

State of Research

The current state of research will be presented further by bringing the areas of sustainable companies, internal sustainability communication and Corporate Culture closer together, based on three research strands. In

general, it should be noted that similar to sustainability being an inter- or transdisciplinary research area, sustainability communication is also in an interface position between different fields and disciplines (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). Previous studies highlight two streams of sustainability communication. On the one hand, it is referred to as a concept and, on the other hand, as sustainability advertising (Golob, Podnar & Zabkar, 2022; Hoppe & Wolling, 2016). In their study, Edgeman and Eskildsen (2014) present a simple model of sustainable business excellence to unite the movements and drive a triple bottom-line strategy for equity, ecology, and economy, resulting in triple bottom-line performance for people, planet, and profit. In their study, the authors assume that dwindling resources and environmental degradation are realities that must be addressed (Edgeman & Eskildsen, 2014).

Goals of Internal Sustainability Communication and Corporate Culture

The strand of research to be considered first is devoted to goals to be pursued through internal sustainability communication in conjunction with Corporate Culture. To this end, Edgemann and Eskildsen (2014) state that sustainable corporate excellence is the result of balancing the competing and complementary interests of key stakeholders, including society and the natural environment. This aims to increase the likelihood of a superior and sustainable competitive position and thus long-term business success (p. 166). Previous studies have primarily focused their investigations on external sustainability communication. In contrast, only a few studies have examined internal sustainability communication. For example, the study by Barendsen, Muß and Silvius (2021) is worth mentioning here, which shows that there is no uniform understanding of sustainability among project members in corporate departments and that more targeted and increased sustainability communication is desired. Studies such as that of Kataria, Kataria and Garg (2013) indicate that employee participation is necessary for the implementation of goals regarding internal sustainability, as the effectiveness of internal

communication measures depends to a large extent on these very employees. In a study by Graham, Grennan, Harvey and Rajgopal (2022), it was shown that Corporate Culture is an important value driver of companies and serves their goal achievement (p. 554). They examined the extent to which Corporate Culture influences value creation, ethical decision-making, and innovation. The researchers were able to demonstrate that former executives believe that culture is significantly important for their company.

Measures of Internal Sustainability Communication and Corporate Culture

As already addressed by Kataria et. al (2013), the achievement of internal sustainability communication goals is also accompanied by the implementation of internal communication measures. Therefore, the research strand on internal sustainability communication measures and Corporate Culture will now be highlighted in more detail. A study by Samans and Nelson (2022) describes the value creation of sustainable companies with some core elements. These include (1) robust, sustained profitability and (2) decent work and adequate compensation. In addition, the authors include (3) respect for human rights in general, (4) internalization of significant external environmental impacts in the production and sale of goods and services, and lastly (5) high standards of ethics and corporate governance among these core elements (Samans & Nelson, 2022, p. 21). According to the authors, companies are sustainable if their actions create sustainable corporate values for stakeholders and shareholders. Furthermore, a company's sustainability must not only be communicated to those around it, but also passed on internally. Previous studies have often focused on external sustainability communication, examining, for example, how sustainability reports are structured as well as presented and how sustainability measures are communicated in the form of organizational values and mission statements (Borkowski et al., 2012). Complementing this, in the area of internal sustainability communication, Strottner and Huck-Sandhu (2021) took a look at the role

of internal behavioral communication when sustainability strategies are to be established in the company. Here it becomes apparent that internal communication measures must be implemented strategically and in a structured manner for them to succeed (p. 212). It is not only important to inform employees, but also to motivate and involve them so that sustainability can be implemented in the company. Sustainability should therefore take place in every part of a company. For this to happen, it is important to consider sustainability as part of the measures of the Corporate Culture.

Effects of Internal Sustainability Communication and Corporate Culture

Following the measures, the third strand of research brings together previous findings on impacts arising from internal sustainability communication and Corporate Culture. Biedenbach and Manzhynski (2016) were able to show through their research that effective internal branding strategies can support the successful implementation of sustainability measures (p. 302). If successful, employees' perceived identity with the organization is strengthened and commitment can be increased. Linnenluecke and Griffith (2010) also examined the relationship between an organization's cultural orientation and its pursuit of sustainability principles. The authors note as implications that members of each subculture of an organization may have different attitudes toward corporate sustainability. It is suggested that changes on the surface can create a conducive context for changes in employee values and beliefs, or even baseline assumptions (Linnenluecke & Griffith, 2010, p. 364). Taking this further, Signitzer and Prexl (2007) examined the role of communication in the corporate sustainability process. Here, it was found that Corporate Culture has an impact on sustainability management and communication (p. 11). It is shown that Corporate Culture is important for the formation and continuation of values. In this context, employees in particular are a significant influencing factor that can be reached via internal communication. In summary, it has been shown that sustainability

as a value of a company can be supported by internal sustainability communication in order to be perceived as an attractive institution, to be competitive or to contribute to societal goals in general.

Derivation of the Research Questions

The derivation of the research guiding question and its sub-research questions follows from a consideration of theory and the current state of research. As already presented, it is clear that not only the field of sustainability, but also the field of internal corporate communication has become increasingly important in research and practice in recent years. However, the linking of both topics in the form of internal sustainability communication and its influence on Corporate Culture has hardly been researched so far, especially in terms of goals, measures, and effects. This research therefore aims to investigate in more detail the influence of organizations' internal sustainability communication on Corporate Culture. For this purpose, the following *research question* (RQ) was formed:

RQ: What potential does internal sustainability communication offer in shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies?

From this research guiding question, three *sub-research questions* were derived to investigate in more detail how and to what extent there is a relationship between internal sustainability communication and Corporate Culture in companies. Due to the previous focus on external sustainability communication, the fact that there is no uniform understanding of the topic of sustainability and the recognition that corporate culture is a value driver of companies needs to be taken into account. Also Kataria et al. (2013) examined framework conditions for the successful implementation of internal sustainability goals, but did not define these goals in concrete terms. Therefore, the following sub-research question was derived:

RQ1: What are the goals of internal sustainability communication with regard to corporate culture?

In the area of measures, mainly external sustainability communication has been considered thus far. However, sustainability communication should not only take place for stakeholders and shareholders, but also for the employees of a company. The role of internal sustainability communication with regard to corporate culture has already been examined by Strottner and Huck-Sandhu (2021), but this paper will take a closer look at concrete sustainability measures and their implementation in communication for employees, which is why the following sub-research question can be formulated:

RQ2: What measures are used to design internal sustainability communication with regard to Corporate Culture?

The third question examines what has been achieved with the previously examined measures. Here, both value and behavioral changes of employees are taken into account, as well as changes at the overall company level. Signitzer and Prexl (2007) examined the role of communication in the corporate sustainability process, but they again did not take the internal communication of sustainability into account. Therefore, the third sub-research question examines how exactly the support through internal sustainability communication looks like and what influence it has on corporate culture:

RQ3: What effects can be seen from internal sustainability communication with regard to Corporate Culture?

Method

Research Design

In this research project, the method of partially standardized guided interviews was used. The data obtained were subsequently evaluated and analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2016). In order to present the methodological approach in detail, the qualitative data collection method, the recruitment and compilation of the sample as well as the qualitative data analysis strategy are considered below.

Qualitative Data Collection Method

The semi-structured guided interview was chosen for data collection because it is considered a structured interview method and allows for comparability of findings. The guide provides questions and order but allows for certain individual adjustments and flexibility during the interview (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 184). The topics and questions of the interview guide were derived from the research questions and underlying theoretical considerations as part of the operationalization process and aim to elicit information and self-disclosure needed with a view to answering the research question(s). The guide is structured by main questions in such a way that in each case only questions that are essential for answering the research questions are included. The questions are intentionally phrased in an open-ended manner to avoid suggesting possible answers to the interviewees. Sub-questions were also formulated for most of the main questions, which may or may not be asked depending on the course of the interview. The structure used, which is determined by the main questions and sub-questions, is flexible and can thus be easily changed depending on the situation, which makes it possible to compare the findings afterwards.

Based on the main research question "What potential does internal sustainability communication offer in shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies?" and the three sub-research questions, the operationalization of formal questions (research questions) into test questions (interview questions) took place in the further course to approach the research object in the best possible methodological way (Meyen, Löblich & Pfaff-Rüdiger, 2019). The guideline was structured according to the aspects taken up in the sub-research questions (RQ1) goals, (RQ2) measures, and (RQ3) impacts to ensure the best possible stringency in interviewing.

Recruitment and Composition of the Sample

All sustainable companies based in Germany are considered to be the basic population of the research. Since a specially constructed measurement instrument for measuring the sustainability factor of companies appeared to be difficult to implement for the formation of the sample, an existing ranking was used to recruit interview partners. In 2021, the German magazine STERN, in collaboration with Statista, published a ranking of the 200 most sustainable companies based in Germany (Statista commissioned by Stern, 2021). In this, the dimensions of sustainability (ecological, economic, social) were used, which also form the theoretical basis of this work and thus ensure the suitability of the sample for the following research. Based on the field access, the recruitment of at least 12 interview partners was aimed for. Ultimately, a total of 15 communication and sustainability managers were recruited for the interviews. The study's sample thus consists of communications and sustainability managers from companies that employ at least 500 people, have particularly high sales or are listed in an index of the DAX family. The companies are mostly among the market leaders in Germany in the areas of insurance, energy, finance, chemical industry, digitalization, industrial technology, materials manufacturing, sporting goods manufacturing and waste services (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Sample

Interview No.	Official Position of the Interviewee	Industry Field
1	Vice President Group Communications	Tech
2	Senior Manager Corporate Sustainability	Chemics
3	Head of Culture and Sustainability	Engineering
4	Sustainability & DEI Manager	Online-Marketplace
5	Head of Corporate Communication & PR	Public service
6	Manager Corporate Communications	Intralogistics
7	Sustainability Manager & Lead Global Sustainibility Communications	Multi-industry
8	Group Communications & Brand	Multi-industry
9	Sustainabillity Officer	Finance
10	Global Corporate Media Realtions, Sustainability and HR	Material manufacturer
11	Senior Head of Corporate Sustainability	Sports
12	Head of Organizational Developement & Sustainability	Public service
13	Head of Internal Communication & Engagement	Multi-industry
14	Press Officer Sustainability Issues	Energy
15	Head of Corporate Communications & Brand	Insurance

Since thematic expertise of communications managers must be queried in order to answer the research questions, cases were included in the sample

that appear to be particularly meaningful for answering the questions. The sampling strategy of targeted selection of certain types of cases according to Döring and Bortz (2016, p. 304) was thus used for the study. This is characterized by the fact that the underlying questions relate to a specific target group, in this case the group of experts on internal sustainability communication with reference to Corporate Culture. The sample generated through the chosen method does not claim to be representative with regard to a precisely defined target population, but rather aims to represent the range of manifestations of the social issue under investigation as exhaustively as possible through the targeted selection of a few cases (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 302). All interviews were conducted and recorded over a period of one month via videoconferencing platforms. The length of the interviews varied between 27:23 minutes and 45:32 minutes.

Qualitative Data Analysis Method

Qualitative content analysis was used to evaluate the 15 interviews conducted by first transcribing the audio tracks in their entirety and then cleaning them up to correct transcription errors. The interview transcripts resulting from this process were analyzed via computer-assisted qualitative data analysis using MAXQDA. The qualitative content analysis was primarily theory-based deductive as well as partially data-based inductive. To create the category system, as a central component of the evaluation strategy, categories were derived from the research questions using the deductive approach. Another category was formed by inductive procedure after reviewing the transcripts, as it turned out to be suitable and necessary. The interpretative evaluation of the documents was done through the systematic process of coding. The transcripts were coded using a category system consisting of five main categories. Coding was conducted by two researchers and achieved intercoder reliability of 60 % agreement after test coding and training. Following the coding, paraphrasing of the coded text segments was conducted as a baseline for the subsequent presentation of results and discussion. In order to highlight

possible connections between individual codings within an interview and thus to be able to link individual paraphrases, the paraphrasing was implemented by those who also conducted the interview. The following chapter presents the concrete results, which are then examined in more detail in the discussion section.

Findings

In order to be able to present the results adequately, they are organized below on the basis of the three sub-research questions: Goals, measures and effects of internal sustainability communication.

Goals of Internal Sustainability Communication

In general, the results show that it is important for those responsible for communications to first communicate sustainability issues internally before they can be authentically sold externally. Five different goals can be identified across the interviews conducted. First, the general goal of (1) creating more awareness for the topic of sustainability and thus creating awareness, understanding and commitment for the abstract topics in the workforce is increasingly emphasized. Internal sustainability communication should thus make topics "more lively and more tangible" and thus show positive examples from practice, as said by an interviewee. There is also a particular focus on (2) informing and educating employees. Specific goals mentioned include encouraging employees to take initiative, reducing the complexity of content to make it easier to understand, and regularly informing employees so that they can, for example, communicate the values to customers. The overriding goal is thus for the topic of sustainability to become an attitude that everyone in the company shares, that is present in all actions, and that plays a role in all decision-making within the company. To achieve these goals, those responsible for communications rely on special training and education. In addition, (3) educating management is a clearly expressed goal of the respondents. For example, the topic of sustainability should be brought to the attention of managers so that it increasingly finds its way into internal

communications through jour fixes. This should enable faster progress in the implementation of sustainability measures. Furthermore, the intention is expressed to also (4) establish a link between corporate strategy or goals and sustainability through internal sustainability communication. Thus, sustainability is to be integrated into strategy communication and in the future, the challenge of an internal sustainability strategy is to be tackled across all brands in order to generate uniformity. Here, the communications department should act as a link. The fifth and final objective relates to the internal drive of the communications departments. The aspiration of the communication departments is to (5) holistically consider the topic of sustainability as "the driver topic for the future" (interviewee), on which companies should focus with regard to all dimensions of the TBL. The reason frequently cited for this is the ongoing development of climate change, which requires decisive action. For this, further resources for sustainability communication need to be built up within the company in order to be able to tackle these challenges in the future.

In conclusion, with regard to the assessment of the future role of the topic of sustainability in internal communications, 14 out of 15 communications managers see an increased importance. On the one hand, with a view to more frequent thematization in the communications departments, but on the other hand also in the company in general. Special sustainability departments could thereby become obsolete in the future according to estimates since the topic of sustainability is communicated and thought about holistically across all departments.

Measures of Internal Sustainability Communication

Sustainability is communicated internally via many different channels, such as the *intranet*, *town hall meetings* or *information screens*. However, the results also show that it is not enough to simply publish an information article on the intranet, for example. Successful sustainability communication requires a variety of communication channels that involve employees in different ways and encourage them to make changes

themselves. In addition to the classic information texts on the intranet, *videos* and *events* on the topic of sustainability are also used. The aim here is for employees to contribute their own ideas, plan actions and gain experience themselves. The employees are thus of crucial importance, as they produce, consume, and communicate sustainability knowledge.

Above all, employees' own initiative and comprehensible communication play a major role. Particular importance is attached to events that encourage active involvement. Various events on the topic of sustainability use concrete examples to show employees the changes sustainability can make and the effects such changes can have on them personally. This makes it easier to create an awareness of environmental changes and also makes knowledge, shared values and corporate goals accessible and tangible for all employees. Examples of sustainability events include *environmental practice days, sustainability weeks, specific awards* and *online events*. However, sustainability can only be achieved if all three dimensions are considered. The results on the individual dimensions show that the companies surveyed attach importance to aspects from all areas of sustainability. On the ecological level, r*egional canteens, job bikes* and the *reduction of CO2 emissions* are communicated as concrete measures. On a social level, the majority of the measures relate to support for *social projects* outside the company, *diversity issues* and *working conditions* for employees. The main points on the economic level are *energy efficiency, savings potential of the company* and *optimization of the supply chains*. However, results reveal that less attention is often paid to the economic dimension.

Internal communication should motivate and retain employees and give them access to shared knowledge and values. This is shaped by employee engagement, which is why events contribute to this development. According to Schein's model of Corporate Culture, corporate values belong to the second level. This is about representative convictions which, in relation to the topic of sustainability, are part of the goals and ideologies of the workforce. Internal sustainability communication can lead to

changes in attitude among employees. For sustainability to bring success to the company, the topic must be included in all corporate considerations. The support of the top management is therefore seen as essential in getting new topics on the agenda and driving sustainability communication forward within the company. When communication comes from the very top, it is seen as particularly credible and encourages imitation. The involvement of top management in the area of sustainability is very high in most companies, so that support can be built on from this side.

The perspective of employees toward internal sustainability communication measures can be seen as very positive overall. Most employees are open to the topic of sustainability and the measures taken by the companies and are prepared to support actions and courses of action. Employee awareness of the topic of sustainability has risen sharply, which has its origins in the fact that companies are trying to show a connection between sustainability measures and corporate strategy. The feedback from employees in this regard is mostly positive and employees are very motivated to change their actions on the topic of sustainability. In addition to the many positive voices, there is also negative feedback. But this can also be used for the further development of internal sustainability communication, because sustainability is always evolving and must always be rethought. In addition, most of the interviewees do not consider it realistic to be able to convince all employees of a company of this topic. Nevertheless, values and standards associated with sustainability can be communicated to all internal stakeholders and a common understanding of this can be created if sustainability communication is perceived internally as predominantly positive.

The topic of sustainability will continue to play a special role in internal communications in the future. Sustainability communication is to be implemented in a more comprehensible way, as sustainability topics are often very abstract and thus often incomprehensible to employees. The more comprehensible and approachable the communication is, the more likely employees are to adopt the behaviors presented. In the future, more

attention will be paid to diversity, which shows that sustainability is not only thought of on an ecological level, but also on a social level. Overall, it could be confirmed that internal sustainability communication measures have an influence on corporate values and thus also on Corporate Culture in the long term, as they shape employees' attitudes and behaviors.

Effects of Internal Sustainability Communication

Internal sustainability communication can bring about particularly positive behavioral changes among employees. This can be seen, for example, in the form of increased engagement with sustainability issues or the introduction of new ideas for improving or implementing sustainability in the company. There are five specific causes that have led to behavioral changes among employees: (1) the launch of a new corporate strategy highlighting sustainable aspects of the company, (2) the establishment of internal sustainability awards, (3) initiatives by works councils, and (4) holding conferences on sustainability topics. Another reason cited was (5) employee awareness of changes in products, operations, locations, as well as markets. These changes are driving cultural change within the company, which manifests itself in an interplay between internal sustainability communication measures and changes in employee behavior. Thus, it can be stated that through continuity, internal sustainability communication can contribute to the anchoring of changed and sustainability-oriented basic assumptions in the long term, which profoundly shape the Corporate Culture. For behavioral changes to take place, communication must appeal to employees' self-interest and common sense. In addition to positive feedback, there is of course also criticism, for which solutions are subsequently found in dialog with those responsible for sustainability.

The previous explanations show that internal sustainability communication can lead to behavioral changes among employees that are fundamentally positive. As a result, the company-related goal of readiness for change can be fulfilled in internal communication. A contribution is also made to internal relationships and increased commitment, and

awareness of sustainability issues is created. The behavioral changes can be described as part of a cultural change, whereby influence can be exerted on the Corporate Culture. In this context, they can be located in the third level according to the model of Corporate Culture in the basic assumptions and thus contribute to a profound change for sustainability anchored in the company. Through the reaction of employees to continuous internal sustainability communication, e.g. in the form of *participation in discussions*, sustainability can in turn develop further, resulting in a dynamic interplay.

The results make it clear that internal sustainability communication, primarily in the form of *participatory calls*, should contribute to the activation of employees and aims to promote their commitment. Through the various forms of internal sustainability communication to activate employees, visible structures and processes of the first level of Corporate Culture can be manifested, co-designed and changed. Based on the statements, it becomes apparent that communication plays an important role in Corporate Culture and in this case, for example, the participation of all employees is crucial for achieving sustainability goals.

Through measures of internal sustainability communication, the corporate values in relation to sustainability can be consolidated or even further developed on the second level of Corporate Culture. Integrating sustainability into corporate values can also create greater awareness of environmental change among employees as they gain an understanding of the need for their company to evolve its goals in response to environmental change. The impact of internal sustainability communication on corporate values can be seen by a strengthening of already existing values that are coupled with sustainability or by a further development of values that now include sustainable aspects. In order to be able to classify the results and make recommendations for action, a brief discussion is required.

Discussion

Integrating Internal Sustainability Communication at All Levels of a Company

The results have clearly shown that internal sustainability communication is gaining in importance and that this is closely linked to external communication. Since the topic must be treated holistically across all departments of a company so that it also becomes part of the Corporate Culture, the following *discussion thesis* (DT) can be established:

DT1: *In order to successfully communicate the topic of sustainability internally and thus establish it as part of the Corporate Culture, the goal must be to inform and educate all levels of the company equally.*

Based on this thesis, recommendations for action can be drawn up for the individual hierarchical levels. Starting with the employees of a company, it can be stated that a reduction in complexity must take place. The goal must therefore be to make scientific topics in the context of sustainability more comprehensible. Here, it should always be considered which department is being addressed, since there must be differences between the communication for employees in the production versus the office, for example. This is the only way to promote awareness, understanding and commitment. Additionally, it is also important to educate the management in order to integrate the topic of sustainability into internal communication and achieve faster progress. This is particularly relevant so that people in management positions can communicate the main topics to the respective departments. Management thus has the function of an intermediary between top management and employees. Therefore, the goal here should be to clarify the focal points in the area of sustainability so that the management level can reduce the complexity for employees. Linking corporate goals to sustainability is also important. Here, it is important not to view sustainability as a separate issue, but to think about it in every process and every action. Once again, the ecological, social, and economic dimensions all play a role. The thesis confirms that it is of great

importance to integrate all levels of the company, as this is the only way to ensure that sustainability can be thought of holistically. In order to ultimately achieve this, financial, human and time resources are required, which must be approved by the top management. That being the case, it is also essential at this level to position sustainability specifically as part of the corporate strategy so that it has a permanent place on the agenda in the future and can find its way into the Corporate Culture. Sustainability officers, for example, can help here by dealing specifically with the topic and thus making concrete recommendations.

Involving Employees for a Successful Internal Sustainability Communication

The present results make it clear that a variety of communication measures are necessary for the successful implementation of internal sustainability communication. It became apparent that employees must be involved and encouraged by means of various communicative measures in order to promote proactive action. Companies should therefore diversify their communication channels with regard to sustainability communication in order to address a broad range of employees. In this context, communication should be as transparent, approachable and comprehensible as possible, since sustainability communication usually deals with abstract subject matter that highlights complex interrelationships between social, economic and ecological factors. The following discussion thesis can be derived from this.

DT2: *For successful internal sustainability communication, it is necessary to use a variety of communication measures to actively involve employees and thus stimulate a change in their behavior.*

The results particularly refer to communicative measures that promote employees' own initiative and at the same time convey information in a comprehensible way. In-house events, for example, play a crucial role here, as they show employees concrete examples of sustainability, create awareness of environmental changes and also communicate shared

knowledge, values and corporate goals. Furthermore, in the context of internal company events, employees can be directly involved through certain actions, for example by presenting their own ideas in relation to sustainability goals. This could lead to greater commitment and a change in behavior. Accordingly, the concrete recommendation for action is to hold regular events and give employees the opportunity to contribute their own ideas through interactive formats, thus actively motivating them to take action. The finding that events work well for communicating sustainability topics could be due to the fact that sustainability is not only communicated as an abstract construct, but it can be made tangible on a personal level. In addition, events are always a break from everyday working life, which could be conducive to proactivity on the part of employees.

The evaluation also reveals that sustainability can only be achieved if all three dimensions (ecological, social and economic) are taken into account. However, companies do not focus equally on all dimensions. In particular, the economic dimension often receives less attention. This could be due to the fact that it is less tangible and emotionally appealing to employees. A concrete recommendation for action in order to communicate the concept of sustainability in its entirety is to also communicate the economic effects of sustainability measures and make them tangible in order to sensitize employees to the economic savings potential of the company. Particularly in this dimension, a focus should be placed on making complex topics comprehensible to all employees.

It also becomes clear that the support of the management is of great importance for internal sustainability communication. The reasons for this presumably lie in the role model and authority status of the company's management. The involvement of top management therefore represents a clear recommendation for action. The goal should be to carry out the communicative measures with the involvement of top management in order to signal the relevance of the topic to employees. These findings are directly related to the conclusion that sustainability measures should be

linked to the corporate strategy and corporate values in order to generate an optimal impact. Employees should understand how sustainability can be seen as an integral part of the Corporate Culture and what contribution they can personally make to benefit from it strategically.

Top Management as an Important Factor for Successful Internal Sustainability Communication

The results show that continuous internal sustainability communication aimed at activating and engaging employees can bring about positive behavioral changes and drive cultural change within the company. These behavioral changes include, for example, increased engagement with sustainability issues, such as interest in healthy food from local supply chains and sustainable transportation, bringing new ideas to improve or implement sustainability issues, or participating in collaborative initiatives.

DT3: *The extent to which successful effects of internal sustainability communication are evident depends strongly on the involvement of the top management.*

It becomes clear from the results that, for example, the introduction of a new corporate strategy in which the importance of sustainability is emphasized can be classified as a cause of behavioral changes among employees and a triggered cultural change. A new, sustainable corporate strategy is often decided at the level of top management or by the supervisory boards, i.e., from the highest hierarchical position, which can have an enormous influence on employee behavior. It can be argued that the internal impetus from top hierarchical positions creates a framework for broad employee participation. Employees feel encouraged to raise their voices on sustainability issues and actively participate in shaping a participatory Corporate Culture.

However, the results also indicate that it is not only corporate management that should be singled out as a central factor for successful internal sustainability communication. For example, the introduction of

sustainability awards can lead to changes in employee behavior as well. They encourage employees to actively engage with sustainability issues and contribute innovative ideas. Recognition for their commitment will likely serve the employees' reward system and thus reinforces their motivation to continue to deal with sustainability issues in the future and thus actively help shape the change in Corporate Culture. It can therefore be assumed that employees are more willing to engage intensively with the topic if they can contribute their own ideas and thoughts, which are perceived and valued by the (top) management. Furthermore, the results show that internal conferences have a significant influence on the behavioral changes of employees. The dialog-promoting character of a conference stimulates discussions and joint learning, which could be used to explain a change in employee behavior and Corporate Culture. In conclusion, it can be deduced from the results that a change in perception on the part of employees towards company products, operating sites, locations, and markets plays a central role in the change of employee behavior. It is possible that the change in perception leads to employees being encouraged to adapt their behavior to new circumstances, which inevitably results in a change of their own behavior.

In summary, further research is needed for a deeper understanding of the causes concerning the effects of internal corporate communications described above to be able to make clear statements about changes in employee behavior and the influence on Corporate Culture. However, it remains clear that although the influence of corporate management on Corporate Culture and employee behavioral change is significant, change processes and behavioral changes cannot be initiated solely from above. This means that corporate communication measures in particular, which activate employees and aim to promote their commitment, can imply desired effects. Through these measures, internal sustainability communication helps to manifest, shape, and change the structures and processes of the Corporate Culture. Communication thus plays an important role in shaping the Corporate Culture, and the inclusion of all employees in this is seen as crucial to achieving sustainability goals.

In this context, the effects of internal sustainability communication on corporate values can consist of strengthening existing sustainability-related values or integrating new sustainable aspects into corporate values in the long term.

Limitations and Future Research

As a limitation, not all sustainable companies in the general population could be surveyed due to limited research resources. In addition, the survey is not representative, as it was decided to deliberately select a sample that does not reflect the basic population. In the interviews, it became apparent that the basic assumptions underlying Corporate Culture are difficult to interrogate. This also represents a reason for a rather low direct reference to Corporate Culture in the interviews. The interviewees also did not have a uniform understanding of the concept of Corporate Culture, so that a bias in the answers can also be assumed. In retrospect, a difference was also found between commercial companies and public-sector companies. Public sector companies focused more on the "environmental" pillar of sustainability and did not have as strong a separation between external and internal communication in terms of their organizational structure and communication goals compared to the rest of the for-profit companies. Overall, however, the study met the essential quality criteria of scientific qualitative research.

Further research should address the perspective of employees in addition to the focus on corporate communication officers set here. Their perspective was neglected in the context of this project but is highly relevant for the holistic presentation of the potential of internal sustainability communication for Corporate Culture. In particular, a longitudinal study to assess the long-term impact of internal sustainability communication measures on employee behavior and attitudes would be of research interest. In addition, a qualitative study of the role of managers in promoting a sustainable Corporate Culture could provide further interesting insights and complement and consolidate previous research.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to take a closer look at the impact of internal sustainability communication on Corporate Culture. For this purpose, three sub-research questions on the (RQ1) goals, (RQ2) measures and (RQ3) effects of internal sustainability communication on Corporate Culture were formulated, which contribute to answering the overall research question "What potential does internal sustainability communication offer in shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies?". In general, it should be noted that internal sustainability communication has a high priority in all companies surveyed. This form of communication pursues various goals, such as informing and educating employees and promoting Corporate Culture. An authentic and consistent presentation both internally and externally is particularly important. According to the respondents, internal sustainability communication offers the opportunity to strengthen the Corporate Culture and position the company as an attractive employer.

Communication takes place via various channels and is mainly illustrated by videos and interactive events. These measures are intended to encourage employees' own initiative and enable them to gain their own experience in the area of sustainability. In order to perceive sustainability holistically, communication measures are carried out on the three levels of ecology, economy and social issues, with comparatively less attention being paid to the economic dimension. The impact of the communication measures is particularly evident in relation to corporate values. In particular, the personal attitudes of employees are influenced by sustainability communication. In order to communicate and reinforce sustainability values, the support of the company and top management is crucial. Top management is strongly involved and employees generally perceive the measures as positive. Accordingly, it can be concluded that internal sustainability communication leads to a positive change in behavior among employees. In the long term, this change can help to firmly anchor changed and sustainably oriented basic assumptions,

especially if communication is continuous. The impact of internal sustainability communication on corporate values can be seen both in the strengthening of existing values associated with sustainability and in the further development of values that now include sustainable aspects.

Therefore, the central question of this research can be answered to the effect that targeted measures within the framework of internal sustainability communication, such as sustainability events, can actively contribute to changing employees' attitudes and behaviors. In the long term, this in turn can lead to a change in corporate values and ultimately also in the Corporate Culture towards more sustainability. By demonstrating sustainable action alternatives, supporting regional canteens, promoting social engagement, achieving energy savings and similar measures, employees are met at their individual points of view and encouraged to shape their actions in the direction of sustainability, all on a voluntary basis. The study shows that with internal sustainability communication tailored to employees, influence can be exerted on the Corporate Culture, even if not all employees support these measures holistically, as they have their own experiences. The results show that in practice, comprehensible, consistent, and credible sustainability communication is particularly important and that its content should be identical both internally and externally.

From a research perspective, this work contributes to linking internal sustainability communication to Corporate Culture. The findings show that it is time to rethink the way companies communicate about sustainability and shape a sustainable future together with employees from within. With this insight, companies can create a culture of awareness and responsibility, where sustainability is not just a marketing tool, but a fundamental value that is embedded in all areas of the business. This paradigm shift will not only change the way companies operate, but also the expectations of consumers and society at large.

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