1. What actions can executive leaders take to accelerate environmental sustainability?

One of the most important actions that executive leaders can take is making it clear to all employees that environmental sustainability is among the top priorities at the company. This can be accomplished by establishing norms, setting expectations and goals, and communicating commitments that have been made towards the acceleration of sustainability at the organization. The expectations, goals, and commitments should be clearly documented in a way that is understandable for all employees, and the information should be made available externally so the public and shareholders can hold the leaders accountable. The roles and responsibilities of departments and individual employees as it relates to these goals should be a part of the documentation, should be outlined in job descriptions, and should be well known throughout the organization so employees know who to contact if they have questions about these goals. The documentation should allow for assessment, feedback, and contribution from all levels in the organization. The goals should be assessed on a regular basis (e.g., quarterly or twice a year) and updated when needed. Executive leaders should also take actions that will empower employees and engage them in the process towards the acceleration of environmental sustainability. This can be accomplished by investing in the employees through training courses, team building activities, or other educational programs. This will allow them to feel like they could take ownership over a part of the process as well as feel accountable towards completing the goals. The acceleration towards environmental sustainability cannot happen with just one person alone, so leaders should inspire initiative into their employees and encourage collaboration across departments.

1. What are the biggest leadership barriers to environmental sustainability, and how can they be overcome?

Since some organizations have not instilled environmental sustainability aspects into long-term strategies, executive leaders could face barriers when beginning to integrate those aspects with their employees, partners, and shareholders. Some of those barriers include financial incentives not being aligned with sustainability goals, organization systems not set up to address sustainability goals, leaders and employees not prepared for or even opposed to the transition, the scarcity of sustainable partnerships up and down the supply chain, and the absence of acknowledgement that there is even a problem with how environmental sustainability is being addressed. Setting clear goals, expectations, and commitments, as addressed in the previous paragraph, is one way to overcome these barriers. Furthermore, sustainability teams and leaders should be valued and listened to just as much as financial decision makers in the organization by engaging with them early and often across all projects. If environmental sustainability is considered during every stage and considered in every department, it will be easier long term to meet the organization’s sustainability goals in a financially safe way. Additionally, leaders should publicly support any policy or regulation changes as it relates to sustainability whether they are introduced internally or externally. This will help communicate to all employees as well as supply chain partners that sustainability is a priority in the organization. Finally, the possible barrier of employees who are not prepared for or even opposed to the transition and how executive leaders can overcome this barrier is addressed in the final paragraph.

1. How can executive leaders navigate internal politics related to environmental sustainability?

Moving towards environmental sustainability initiatives will typically involve some modifications or sometimes even substantial transformations to the current practices and policies at organizations. These changes could introduce some conflicts within the organization that leaders should be prepared to handle. Executive leaders should explain the motivations behind the changes in a clear and transparent way to all employees can help them feel comfortable with the changes. This explanation should highlight the benefits, but not shy away from any potential drawbacks and how you will work through the drawbacks. Some benefits to highlight could be that leaders are managing risks, addressing the needs of customers, staying ahead of competitors, and responding to data that either the organization or external organizations have collected. Potential drawbacks could include introducing new systems or equipment that may involve a learning curve for employees and supply chain obstacles. Leaders should assure employees that they will provide them with any necessary trainings, and they should outline a plan that addresses any complications such as supply chain problems. However, individuals in the organization may still have concerns. There should be a way to address those individual concerns by providing them some space to voice their concerns and the leaders should make the effort to understand their point of view. By anticipating any problems that may arise, executive leaders can ease the transition to more environmental sustainability practices in their organization.