

PURPOSEFUL ENGAGEMENT: HOW SUPERVISOR SUPPORT DRIVES SUSTAINABILITY OUTCOMES

NUHS and Alexandra Hospital demonstrate how employee engagement translates into measurable results, resourcing and recognition.

- I *Employees are more likely to engage with environmental sustainability when it feels meaningful, supported and feasible.*
- II *The supervisory layer is critical to continuing staff-led initiatives, legitimising employee efforts and enabling participation.*
- III *Practical support of employees from supervisors and senior management can turn voluntary initiatives into formal, organisation-wide sustained action.*

Sustainability has risen sharply on the corporate agenda as climate risks intensify amid growing expectations from society, government and investors.¹ In 2024, global temperatures reached the warmest levels recorded since 1880,² and the World Meteorological organisation³ reported that warming trends continued into 2025. The latest assessment by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) also notes widespread climate-driven changes affecting weather and climate extremes in every region, with mounting adverse impacts on both nature and people.⁴ Yet many organisational sustainability strategies still concentrate on policies, reporting and senior leadership commitments. What often gets less attention is how sustainability ambitions are translated into day-to-day behaviour on the ground.



BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

One underused lever of sustainability is employee engagement, particularly the kind that prompts staff to take initiative beyond formal job scopes. Social sustainability—the ‘S’ in ESG (environmental, social and governance)—is frequently discussed at the level of workforce wellbeing and culture, but less often translated into actionable mechanisms that drive environmental outcomes. Notably, employee engagement at work has been low worldwide, hovering around 20% since 2018,⁵ and with job descriptions rarely able to anticipate every relevant environmental task, many meaningful environmental improvements are dependent on voluntary, employee-led action. With the growing need for increased employee engagement, coupled with rising climate challenges, I conducted a study on how employees in Singapore could become more personally engaged and have a greater sense of belonging at work, leading to greater voluntary identification with and initiation of environmental initiatives at the workplace. Under the guidance of my dissertation committee chair, Associate Professor Tan Hwee Hoon of the Lee Kong Chian School of Business (LKCSB), Singapore Management University (SMU), my study drew on Kahn (1990)’s⁶ psychological conditions for engagement: meaningfulness, safety and availability of resources. It also considered the impact of biospheric values of the employee on this engagement. Data were gathered from a survey of 496 participants in Singapore across 19 industries. The study assessed personal engagement through employees’ perceived psychological meaningfulness, safety and availability of resources for environmental initiatives. It then examined whether these conditions were associated with employees voluntarily identifying and taking on environmental initiatives, often described as organisational citizenship behaviour towards the environment (OCBE).

The findings of the research study were instructive for organisations looking to drive impact through behavioural change. We found that:

- Perceived supervisor support was significantly associated with employees’ perceived meaningfulness and availability of resources for environmental initiatives.

- Employees’ perceived meaningfulness and availability of resources were, in turn, significantly associated with OCBE.
- The psychological condition of safety did not emerge as necessary for OCBE in this context, likely because supervisor support already provided a sense of permission and protection for employees to act.

The findings of the study suggest that, for voluntary environmental sustainability initiatives, the supervisory layer is pivotal. It shapes whether employees perceive environmental sustainability work as meaningful, supported and feasible, thus encouraging them to undertake this work on a voluntary basis.

ALEXANDRA HOSPITAL: SUPERVISOR SUPPORT IN ACTION

The findings of the study resonated with Jeffrey Chun, Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Alexandra Hospital (AH) and Group Chief Operating Officer of the National University Health System (NUHS). At AH, employee engagement played a visible role in the organisation’s sustainability journey through a Special Interest Group. The Group began when a nurse approached the hospital CEO, who was known to support environmental sustainability. She was then linked to Mr Chun, and the group was formed after a few interested staff members came together.

Importantly, the Group operated with minimal formal infrastructure in the beginning. Staff met during lunch breaks and identified initiatives that did not disrupt clinical duties. Supervisors supported participation, and the group did not require a dedicated budget to begin making improvements. Examples include adjusting air-conditioning temperatures, introducing reusable crockery in wards and digitising information brochures. Though there were no formal incentives for their efforts, the group was dedicated to these environmental initiatives, and the support from supervisors was vital in encouraging their continuation.

Over time, the voluntary efforts became institutionalised. The success of the Special Interest Group led to the allocation of a dedicated full-time equivalent role and a budget for sustainability initiatives at AH. In 2024, KPIs included reducing the energy utility index and paper use; the hospital achieved a 10% reduction relative to the 2020 baseline.



As job descriptions can rarely anticipate every relevant environmental task, many meaningful environmental improvements rely on voluntary, employee-led action.

In 2025, Alexandra Hospital also received two international sustainability awards: Silver Winner, Geneva Sustainability Centre Excellence Award for Hospital Sustainability Acceleration; and Honourable Mention, Ashikaga-Nikken Excellence Award for Low-Carbon Health Care (International Hospital Federation), for the Go-Green programme. These outcomes reflect a progression that many organisations work toward but struggle to deliver: from voluntary initiatives to operational results, and from formal resourcing to external validation.

SCALING IMPACT WITH EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Mr Chun also chairs a NUHS sub-taskforce on waste and recycling under the NUHS Green Plan Steering Committee. Rather than tying outcomes to punitive KPIs or individual bonuses, the sub-taskforce used stretch targets with recognition for achievements. Targets included a 60% reduction in waste and a 60% recycling rate by 2030, benchmarked against 2019 norms, with intermediate targets set annually. The targets were framed as best-efforts, without affecting bonuses.

The sub-taskforce emphasised involvement across levels of staff

and encouraged idea generation. Approximately 80% of ideas were bottom-up. While top-down initiatives tended to have larger budgets and group-wide systems, the impact of bottom-up and top-down initiatives was reportedly broadly comparable—suggesting that staff-led initiatives can deliver tangible gains when supervisors legitimise and enable participation. Within two years, NUHS achieved 15% reduction in waste tonnage; waste generated was 13% lower than 2019 levels, despite increasing workload; 31% reduction in paper usage and recycling (based on trash) increased to 11%, up from 4% in 2019.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Despite the absence of punitive KPIs, the sub-taskforce delivered stronger-than-expected results within a few years of launching its efforts in 2022. This suggests that members were not simply complying with targets; they were acting because the work felt meaningful, and because they had sufficient support and resources to contribute. In other words, practical enablement and encouragement from supervisors and senior management helped translate voluntary participation into sustained action.

The research outcomes also point to an important consideration in Singapore’s organisational context:

where group ties are strong, employee engagement is more likely to spread when it is reinforced at the team level. The NUHS experience reflects this dynamic. Stretch targets were voluntary and achievements were recognised, yet broad participation—supported by supervisors and reinforced by senior management—helped mobilise bottom-up ideas and deliver measurable improvements in waste reduction and recycling outcomes.

In recognising the study’s impact, Mr Chun commented: “the findings emphasised the importance of supervisor support in environment management, which has been crucial in enhancing the meaningfulness and personal engagement of our employees in voluntary environmental initiatives.” The research outcomes have also “validated and reinforced the environmental initiatives at NUHS and AH, providing a strong foundation for our future efforts with the support of senior management and supervisors.”

Taken together, the NUHS and AH examples show how supervisor support for environmental management can activate employee engagement and translate discretionary effort into sustainability outcomes for an organisation. Above all, sustainability impact is not only driven by strategy and governance at the top. It is also shaped by whether supervisors played a role in legitimising, enabling and recognising voluntary environmental sustainability contributions on the ground—generating benefits for both organisational performance and employees. [AHU](#)



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Although top-down initiatives tended to have larger budgets and group-wide systems, their impact matched that of staff-led initiatives, indicating what tangible benefits can be possible with supervisor support.