

Interview

Women Making a Difference in Sustainability

Leaders In. 2021 Edition

Sari Sarin

Head of Sustainability, Fazer

Graduating as a civil engineer, a Master's thesis on reducing emission levels at traffic intersections was the beginning of Sari's sustainability journey. Now, as Head of Sustainability for Finnish food corporation, Fazer, Sari talks to dss+ about how the power of innovation, regenerative farming methods and access to chocolate are reasons to remain positive.





In your opinion, how does the link between leadership, company culture and sustainability encourage innovation?

I think companies have to demonstrate that sustainability is important by making it an integral part of operations. This approach is nourished by company culture and leadership, both of which have a significant impact on how an organisation addresses sustainability issues. As a leader, you have to embrace innovation and be open to new ideas and encourage employees to take ownership of problems and, importantly, provide solutions. Within this, there has to be an element of trial and error. If employees are not allowed to make mistakes, you don't get as many good ideas. So leaders need to create a culture that offers a psychologically safe environment to foster innovation and encourages people to try different things.



Do you have a recommended approach for leaders to incorporate new ideas into their sustainability strategy?

It's essential to facilitate innovation and provide a platform to test and launch new ideas. So whether you have a competition or open invitation for ideas and solutions on sustainability, you also need a process that funnels those ideas through allocated groups and experts with an interest in sustainability. Then a proof of concept exercise determines best in class ideas that can move on to the testing stage. It's about the organisation providing the structure and background administration that allows teams to focus on ideas. Having a more formalised innovation hub also means concepts are not lost, particularly those that need more time to develop. A less fruitful approach is to organise innovation meetings where ideas on sustainability are discussed, but there is no clear facility to progress those ideas.

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Can you give a practical example of how this approach to innovation has achieved a sustainable business outcome?

Fazer is involved in a number of sustainable initiatives. For example, we had been using the oat hulls, which is a side stream from our milling process, for biofuel. However, one of our scientists discovered that the sweetener, Xylitol, can also be produced from oat "waste". So we have now built a new factory with capabilities to use our oat waste as a raw material to make an edible by-product. So it's a great example of a circular economy in action and using innovation to create sustainable value for the business.

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Signing up to the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi) shows how ambitious Fazer is on sustainability. How do these ambitions impact your supply chain?

While safety relies on direct and concrete behaviour, sustainability is also about how your behaviour can promote good actions long term.

As a company in the food sector, 94% of our emissions are from our supply chain. The most significant part of our emissions is from agricultural raw materials we use. So we have partnered with the Baltic Sea Action Group to help farmers reduce emissions from agriculture, particularly nutrients ending up in our waterways, and sequester carbon into the soil. All the farmers we work with can now sign up for a free online course on regenerative farming methods to improve soil health and crop yield whilst benefitting agriculture's impact on the climate and reducing emissions. At the same time, we are monitoring results and putting farmers in touch with leading farmers at the top end of our sustainability requirements. So while we are a relatively small family-owned business, we are finding ways to make a significant impact in improving the sustainability of the supply chain. It's an inspiring project.



Climate risk is a constant cause for concern, particularly among the younger generation. While we need to understand these risks, I think it's equally important to show the upside of progress on sustainability issues to encourage and give hope.



COP26 was an important milestone in tackling climate change. What would you say are the current challenges on moving to a low carbon and more sustainable future?

I think COP26 is an important event due to the fact that COVID-19 has taken the attention during the past 18 months and now it is time to rebuild economic activities in a more sustainable manner, prioritising the activities which will take us towards the goal of limiting the global warming to maximum 1.5 degrees. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report confirmed that we should reduce the emissions much faster than we have done so far. All the nations and leaders will be present so there is a great opportunity to agree on common measures.



The environmental side of sustainability can be an opposing force, particularly when climate risks are escalating. How can we remain upbeat about sustainability?

Climate risk is a constant cause for concern, particularly among the younger generation. So while we need to understand these risks, I think it's equally important to show the upside of progress on sustainability issues to encourage and give hope. As an engineer, I believe strongly in the power of innovation, technology and science to improve the performance and to achieve the sustainability targets, but it's vital to highlight success and communicate more consistently that great work is currently underway. There are many exciting and innovative projects, including one we are investing in that creates proteins out of carbon dioxide. These are reasons to be optimistic about reaching sustainability goals. Plus, working for a company where chocolate is readily available can help put a smile on anyone's face!

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