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# SustainABLE

How to find success as a sustainability professional  
in a rapidly changing world

VIRGINIA CINQUEMANI

Foreword by Jerry Yudelson, "The Godfather of Green"

*“Whether you think you can or you think  
you can’t...you’re right”  
-Henry Ford*

*To my beautiful family – you give me strength*

Virginia Cinquemani

*SustainABLE: How To Find Success*

*as a Sustainability Professional in a Rapidly Changing World*

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# Acknowledgements

Writing a book is not easy-peasy.

Especially if you want to write in English and English is your second language.

If you haven't done it before - without a publishing house cleaning up after you.

And if you have a young family, a business, school runs, and Nativity plays to attend to.

So this book is much credit to all the people who supported me in this process. Without these amazing human beings, acknowledged here in no particular order, this book wouldn't have been possible.

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# Foreword

In my late twenties, I was the project manager for an environmental consulting firm in the San Francisco Bay area, preparing Environmental Impact Reports (EIR) for various development projects, an early form of sustainability reporting required by California law. I learned how to stand my ground on the requirements for such reports, often through “trial by fire.” Here’s one example.

One summer afternoon in 1974, I found myself sitting in an architect’s conference room in San Jose. Sun streamed in through unshaded windows, the room was stuffy, and a senior architect was yelling at me and my two colleagues. The meeting was decidedly unpleasant. We’d written an EIR on his project, a medical office building proposed for construction on former tidal wetlands near San Francisco Bay. He was angry because the draft of the report said, “Alternatives to the Proposed Project” (a section required by law and regulation) should include reopening the wetlands to tidal action, letting it function again as a saltwater marsh.

“That’s not a reasonable option—no other project has to do this,” he argued. He wanted this alternative deleted from the report, but we wouldn’t budge.

“It has to be in the report, or Marin County may reject it as not meeting legal requirements,” I replied. “If the report is incomplete, people may sue your client and delay the project, so we need to keep it.” After more heated discussion, the architect relented and agreed that we can leave this section in the EIR. This wasn’t any garden-variety architect; he was well known – almost famous - and his wife had a powerful position in local politics.

This project offered a chance to stake out a new claim: we shouldn’t put developments in wetlands, a position which I strongly held personally. Instead, I thought we should restore historical marshes, the most productive ecosystems

on Earth. Twenty years earlier, the Army Corps of Engineers straightened the adjacent creek and lined it with concrete, severely disturbing the marsh. Yet some wetlands remained. Our staff biologist had identified a listed endangered species living in the marsh, the red-bellied, saltwater harvest mouse, a small rodent that survived by eating marsh plants and drinking saltwater.

That little mouse turned the tide. After we convinced the architect, we added preserving the marsh (instead of building the project) as a reasonable alternative in our EIR. Both the architect and our team knew the local council would make the final decision, no matter what the report recommended.

The controversy alerted people in the area to the ongoing destruction of marsh habitats from filling in for development projects, a practice eventually halted around San Francisco Bay by the 1980s. After they watched a growing controversy over building on this marsh, the developers abandoned the project. Our work stopped this development, which pleased me immensely. The medical offices might have been a valuable project for the community, but they belonged somewhere else. The icing on the cake: later restored to full tidal flushing, the site is now a natural ecosystem protected as a local park.

Why am I relating this story? This incident happened a long time ago, but I still remember it as a defining moment. Speaking truth to power is not new, but it's often a challenge for young professionals, one that you must master to have a successful career. More importantly, to succeed in promoting the sustainability agenda, you must bring many tools to the task, not only your specialist training but also your personal skills of tact, persistence and advocacy.

I am so pleased that Virginia Cinquemani has written *SustainABLE*, bringing together what she's learned in two decades of work promoting sustainability. I could have used a guide like this when early in my professional career, instead of having to learn everything by trial and error and from what I could glean from more senior colleagues. More importantly, we know now that we don't have all the time in the world to move our economies and societies onto a more sustainable path into the future.

More than being zealous, we must become skilled and persistent in dealing with the worlds of commerce and government as we find them, not as we wish them to be.



When I first became an advocate for the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED certification system about twenty years ago, one thing that helped me was the ability to see the problem from many sides. In particular, I had an MBA and I was able to see the business issues at play, as well as the technical issues. Over several years, I became expert at understanding and presenting the business case for green building.

I realised that while a business might spend \$2.50 USD per square foot for energy, they were spending \$25 to \$50 per square foot for rent, and \$250 to \$500 per square foot for people! So, where did it make sense to pitch the benefits of a green building? At the people! Even though it's energy usage that generates carbon emissions, it's people that drive the profitability of a business. My pitch changed: instead of just saving energy, I emphasized that healthy working environments reduced staff turnover (i.e. voluntary departures) and led to greater productivity.

Moreover, I stressed to many audiences that having a strong commitment to sustainability would allow them to attract and retain the best employees. And, after all, it's people who drive the "top line" (revenue) in a business. In today's world, with a paucity of early and mid-career employees available to most businesses, getting and keeping people is critical for any business (or university, government agency, NGO, etc.)

With a renewed focus on their business dynamics, I was able to convince many business owners and institutions to take another look at the costs of green building and certification, to understand that these costs were minor compared to the potential benefits.

Of course, there are many stages to everyone's growth as a sustainability professional. First you have to master the hard skills – the technical material or enough of it to be credible – but from then on, it's the soft skills that matter, the personal and relationships skills that will make you first a team leader and later an industry leader.

With its multifaceted hues and textures, sustainability is the defining personal, social and political issue of our times. Your commitment to be the best possible sustainability advocate is vital to addressing this issue, so Virginia's presentation of varied methods for personal growth and clever approaches to delivering sustainability is so important.

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*SustainABLE*

Take her message to heart; use what she teaches and become in your own way and in your own sphere, an awesome Green Gorilla!

*Jerry Yudelson, The Godfather of Green*

*December 2019*

# A Note to The Reader

“A large latte, please!”

Ruth<sup>1</sup> winked at me.

“This is my little treat when I go and see clients. It’s on expenses.”

She grabbed a teaspoon and stirred three sugars into the half-litre of milk and coffee she was holding in her hands.

I gulped my espresso whilst we walked briskly to the client’s office, a typical London architectural studio. On the outside, it kept with the Victorian look of the area, whilst on the inside, it was a buzzing sequence of white double height spaces and glass.

We introduced ourselves to the design team, sat down, and Ruth promptly pulled out the BREEAM<sup>2</sup> manual from her bag.

It looked more like a dictionary, with its 400 pages of technical criteria to assess the sustainability of the building our client planned to build.

She ran through a brief introduction on what a BREEAM “bespoke assessment” meant. In part, it included helping them put together the specific assessment criteria for this building, which wasn’t falling within any of the standard types that the framework featured.

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1 Names in this chapter have been changed.

2 BRE Environmental Assessment Method. Is the first ever framework developed to assess the environmental soundness of buildings.

And then off she went, picking one credit at the time, looking at the plans, and telling the team how hard it was to score in the “Daylighting” issue, because of the ambitious combination of illumination levels and daylight factors.

They also needed the right type of recycled aggregates, which could only be deployed for high-grade uses, if they wanted to qualify for the credit.

And their selected materials needed to demonstrate a chain of custody, which extended back to the extraction and the way they were manufactured.

And so on and so forth, for an hour.

One of the designers was taking frantic notes; the others nodded, in pensive silence.

I was observing, new to all of this.

I have to admit: at the time, Ruth impressed me with her knowledge of the framework.

At the same time, I could read in the architects’ eyes an increasing puzzlement and a mixture of not-so-positive thoughts, the loudest being:

“This BREEAM thing is a right pain where the sun doesn’t shine.”

I could tell they were obviously perplexed by the apparent randomness of some of the criteria. That was paired with apprehension about the amount of information they had to provide to demonstrate compliance - on top of their standard work.

But they didn’t dare ask many questions.

Ruth seemed oblivious to all of this - more preoccupied with fitting all her talking points into the single hour we had allocated with the team.

At the end, as jolly as she was at the start of the meeting, Ruth closed the manual, thanked them for their time, and swiftly left the room. I trotted behind her.

“Mission accomplished,” she declared.

Ruth was very efficient. She managed to complete all of her projects on time and knew the BREEAM criteria inside out.

But did she create rapport with her clients?

Did she ask them what they wanted out of it? *Why* they wanted to undergo this process?

Did she reassure them about their concerns or tell them about the benefits of this course?

No.

In this case, the clients *needed* that assessment to be done, but they certainly didn't become advocates of BREEAM. They probably tried to avoid it like the plague in future projects.

Ruth was a sustainability professional with lots of confidence who failed to step into her clients' shoes.

Can you see yourself in Ruth?

Maybe you feel more like Lynn, an experienced sustainability consultant, who had lost her spark.

I've known Lynn for years through my work at BRE<sup>3</sup>. She's one of those sustainability consultants that delivers well project after project. Lynn requested a Skills Diagnostic call with me after one of my Green Gorilla Masterclass Programme introductory webinars.

I was sad to see her so deflated.

Lynn explained that she struggled to come to terms with the fact that, year after year, she was overtaken by younger, experienced colleagues, who somehow got promoted, whilst she stayed in the same position and pay as six years earlier. She was hardworking and knew her technical stuff, and yet, it seemed the management would not trust her in more senior positions. They didn't recognise her worth.

I asked whether she had *asked* for a promotion.

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3 Building Research Establishment. Founded in 1921, BRE is one of the most prestigious and respected built-environment research institutions in the U.K. and beyond.

“No, I haven’t. Isn’t it obvious that I deserve one? But, you know, I’m part-time, and I think my boss doesn’t like that; I feel that he thinks I don’t work hard enough. And every time I ask him something, he ignores me anyway.”

In recent research by Carnegie Mellon University’s economics professor Linda Babcock, co-author of *Women Don’t Ask*, it has emerged that men are four times more likely than women to ask for a raise — and when women do ask, they typically request 30% less than men.

Lynn’s situation was typical. She didn’t have the courage to ask, she had these conjectures in her mind that were stopping her, and she didn’t have a strategy to move forward effectively.

In the meantime, she was increasingly unhappy and frustrated, and felt betrayed by the company she gave so much to in the previous six years.

Let’s explore another example...

Gavin loves his job. He’s a passionate ecologist, and loves carrying out wildlife surveys and environmental impact assessments in his native Scotland.

He graduated a couple of years ago and thoroughly enjoys the outdoor elements of his job. With that said, Gavin wanted to speak with me because, whilst he likes dealing with animals and plants, he struggles to engage with humans.

Every time he has to present his findings to a client, he feels lightheaded, his palms sweat, and his brain is foggier than the English countryside at 5am. For no apparent reason (because he is a skilled ecologist), Gavin looks, in his own words, incompetent and insecure. He stutters and his voice trembles.

It was clear to me that Gavin hadn’t fully explored the self-limiting beliefs about his competence. Whilst a few nerves under stress are normal - and even useful to power the performance - Gavin hadn’t developed a strategy to prevent his nerves from taking over when meeting new people or presenting.

Let’s go for one more...

I met Miles at a breakfast event, which I organised to explore the key skills of environmental professionals.

He was an environmental advisor for an energy company. In his mid-30s, he seemed very self-assured, and had a great presence. However, when I asked the room what the number-one frustration of their profession was, Miles raised his hand and said: “I can’t seem to make an impact.”

We discussed his answer in more detail over coffee, and he explained: no matter what he said, his clients were in the vast majority of cases only interested in making a profit. It was hard for him to promote his values and ethics around sustainability, whilst also condoning his clients’ ruthless point of view.

*Does any of this sound familiar to you?*

Have you ever found yourself in one of these situations? You dread going to work and making a presentation? You’re torn between your sustainability beliefs and values, and a ruthless client? You’re unable to create rapport with clients and wonder why they don’t call back? You’re frustrated by your own reaction to a work challenge – whether it’s an argument, or your low pay compared to your level of expertise? You feel unable to step up and stand your ground?

No matter which applies to you, let me make it clear: you are not alone. Nowadays, thousands of individuals work in sustainability and environmental disciplines, and we all seem to share common traits to a certain extent.

A few years ago, I was working as the Head of Strategic Partnerships for the BRE’s training department, and I was in charge of the membership scheme. I had over a thousand members, mostly BREEAM Assessors and Accredited Professionals. These qualified professionals guide their clients (developers, contractors, and design teams) through a process of evaluation and certification on the sustainability of buildings in line with the BREEAM (BRE Environmental Assessment Method) framework.

I was on the front line, hearing these professionals grumble about their clients on a daily basis. BRE, the body that, for over 100 years, has been at the forefront of the research on buildings in the U.K., was offering plenty of technical courses. However, these people were hungry for more direction on how to use their technical skills effectively. In particular, they needed to learn how to negotiate with their clients, explain the business case for sustainability to them, and influence design teams when they didn’t have any authority over them.

At one point, we did a survey that asked consultants what other courses we could offer to better support them. The overwhelming response was that professionals needed help in more non-technical areas.

Yes, they needed technical knowledge, and BREEAM already offered a huge amount of information to digest and navigate through. However, it became apparent to me that technical knowledge was, in fact, not the final objective. It was only a starting point; the basic level they had to achieve in order to be successful in their profession. More social-based, communication skills were needed to make a real impact.

When it came to moving their clients towards BREEAM and, even more, towards sustainability in general, people didn't know where to start.

The real trouble began whenever a budget suddenly became tight, usually due to an unexpected situation in a project. Sustainability was immediately questioned and labelled as a “nice to have” rather than a “must have”. The consultants had no idea how to incentivise their clients to still pursue the sustainability objectives of the project, in spite of the change in circumstances. For example, by stepping back and looking at their clients' core needs and wants, and prioritising those.

This is when I decided to explore ways of providing ‘soft skills’-support to both BREEAM and other sustainability professionals who experienced the same issues. I wanted to offer courses so specific to this sector that they could resonate deeply and potentially change people's lives.

The world is full of courses; most of them give us information without changing how we work. I'd been in several management courses before. After a day of intense blah-blah, my head would spin and, at the same time, overflow and be empty. Nothing in my life would transform as a consequence of that course. Those courses weren't specific enough to address my own challenges in the sustainability sector, and, as a result, they didn't have a lasting impact on my life. I wanted to change that experience for my fellow sustainability professionals.

In 2018, I founded Green Gorilla as a training and coaching company to address the *soft skills* gap in the sustainability sector. In the process of developing my company, I often posed one question to my colleagues: what's the number-one frustration in your job?



I wanted to address their specific concerns. I wanted to respond to them in a way that no-one else had before.

At this point, dear reader, I invite you to ask yourself: What's the number-one frustration in your job? You may not work with environmental assessment tools, but your answers might be in line with those I received during my first survey:

*“The hardest thing is getting clients to recognise the value of what they're asking for, from an environmental perspective, so they're less quick to dump it when the cost pressure comes on. Clients see the environment and sustainability as an extra cost or an unnecessary headache.”*

*“Some clients are enthusiastic, and need to push sustainability hard in order to get the best tenants for their building; they want the most sustainable building they can get. So, they might apply the standards of BREEAM Outstanding/Excellent, LEED Platinum, WELL, etc. And they have the budget to do so.*

*Other clients, however - especially if they're cash-strapped and only fulfilling a need to meet planning requirements - will want the basic environmental assessment at the lowest possible cost. It's with these clients that BREEAM becomes 'challenging'; never mind trying to promote general sustainability on a project, which may be an even bigger challenge.”*

*“Some clients are very cynical about spending lots of money on sustainability. They just don't feel the cost of it matches the benefits. When they find areas where they must implement sustainability, it's hard to maintain good cooperation.”*

Cooperation, perception of value, and trust (or the lack thereof) came back over and over again as key issues that sustainability professionals face with their clients.

Clients engage with sustainability because they have to, or as a marketing stunt. The ethical argument is a motivating factor for a very small percentage of clients – and that's often a façade placed in front of a business-related goal anyway.

For other professionals, their biggest frustration is confidence - especially in the boardroom during presentations and meetings. I suspect that, for many sustainability professionals, having strong ethical values as their main drivers means they also believe assertiveness equals imposing their own ideas (right or wrong) onto other people. This, in turn, feels unethical.

Some professionals know their technical stuff very well, but don't know how to communicate it for maximum impact.

Others have lost their spark. They encounter daily struggles in pushing sustainability, and may feel like the 'traffic wardens of an environmental assessment', as a fellow consultant once described it. This leaves them feeling empty and unsatisfied with their jobs.

So, this book focuses on helping you find new self-assurance by boosting your confidence in yourself, your knowledge, and your values. I want to provide you with a set of practical tools, so you can start making an impact like you've never managed to before. If you want to be listened to, be more confident, and start proudly offering the best possible service to your clients - every day...

Then read on.

# How to Use This Book

*Are you feeling frustrated in your current career? Or is everything okay, but you know you have more in you?*

*I'll show you how to reverse-engineer what's holding you back, so you can better unlock your real potential.*

I wrote *SustainABLE* to support you in this transformative process, by sharing what I have learnt from my own and my fellow sustainability professionals' experiences, as well as from well-regarded leadership and management experts.

Part 1 looks at the background, explores the reasons why you might feel unfulfilled in your profession right now, and suggests practical ways to reignite your passion.

Part 2 explores the key skills you'll need in finding success as a sustainability professional, as well as how you can develop and refine them. At the end of each chapter, you can take some very practical *Action Steps* to enable you to practice my suggestions in real life.

You can download your *Action Steps Workbook* from **[www.thegreengorilla.co.uk/sustainable-the-book](http://www.thegreengorilla.co.uk/sustainable-the-book)**.

You'll notice that I've used many examples drawn from my experience in the built environment sector. This is where I acquired most of my know-how, but the general principles are applicable to any sector, as I learnt from speaking to professionals of other fields.

You can use this book as a reference manual, dipping in and out as you need it (you might have already mastered certain skills) or read it back-to-back. In

any case, the most important task is applying the techniques that resonate with you in your job and life as often as you can.

Remember, new attitudes need to become habits first, and they will only become skills if you work at them consistently.

# How I Was Saved By a Man That Set Fire to His Sink

*As soon as I left school, I knew I wanted to be an architect. However, my passion and awe for the built environment was nearly killed by an impersonal system that didn't take the human factor into account.*

*A client with too much money and her six decadent bathrooms was the last straw. It gave me the final push I needed to seek a new path.*

*I got a dream job I didn't apply for. I learnt a great deal, but I knew my true calling was to step out on my own - to ignite positive change in other people. People like you.*

Every weekday, I would depart from the train at the last stop - Palermo Centrale in Sicily - and take the 20-minute walk down the perfectly smooth (and slippery) stone pavement that led me to the School of Architecture. With my heart full of purpose, I loved strolling down that city-centre path, in constant awe of the decadent, neglected, and noble architecture. I could smell both mould and freshly-baked croissants wafting from the numerous coffee shops on those early mornings.

In the School of Architecture admission tests, I came fifth out of 500 successful candidates, and some 1,500 applicants overall. Initially, I read that as a sign from the universe that I was meant to be an architect.

I took my studies with the right balance of seriousness, fun, and curiosity. I obtained top marks in the majority of the 52 gruelling exams taken in five years before my final project and dissertation.

The year before graduation, I backpacked in Europe on an interrail ticket with my university friends. We were on a quest to see the best and most significant architecture of the continent with our own eyes. With my dad's Yashica film camera hanging heavy from my neck, I admired the masterpieces of big-name architects. Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Le Corbusier, and Renzo Piano popped out of my university books and into reality in shapes, textures, colours, angles that took my breath away.

"I'll be like them," I told myself.

My purpose, though, wasn't to build my own cathedral in a desert (my ego wasn't big enough for that). Instead, I'd create spaces that would challenge the norm, fit around people like gloves, and make them happy about where they lived, worked, and played. I wanted to bring the outside *inside* in clever ways. I admired the creativity of the masters and felt surprised by the new, exciting feelings inspired in me by those places.

That same year, I had an architectural design teaching assistant who challenged the status quo often - and uniquely. For example, he would walk on (rather than *around*) the bonnet of cars that were badly parked on pavements, blocking the way for pedestrians - I'm sorry to say, a very common Sicilian scenario.

At home, he would clean his bathroom by setting the basin and WC on fire with pure alcohol and a lighter - after all, fire kills bacteria.

Mario Martelli was the first free-thinker I ever met, who could challenge with enthusiasm any existing state of affairs in the name of justice and common sense, never fearing judgement.

Mario's influence was key to my formative professional years, not in the least because he was the first to ever mention the word "*bio-architettura*" to my fellow

colleagues and I: architecture that integrated with nature. Rather than negatively impacting it, it worked in tandem to power the building's functions in a gentle, respectful way. It's not the architecture of big statements but, rather, architecture that 'makes sense'.

My other lecturers would sit down and read from their notes, with no visual aids, and talk about how we should worship the masters of brutalist architecture - especially those who left concrete structures and mechanical systems exposed in their 'honest' language.

It was generally three hours of philosophical theories around the meaning of rational modern architecture... and the importance of Le Corbusier in our work as architects... and more "blah blah blah"s that were so impractical.

By the end, it was so far from the human element that not even my two morning double-espressos could keep my eyes open.

In stark contrast, Mario jumped up and down the stage excitedly, using plenty of images and fascinating stories to deliver visionary lessons, during which he showed us those first buildings constructed in the middle of forests, featuring garden roofs, mud walls, and organic shapes. Light was a design element; the environmental performance of the buildings was key to their occupants' health and well-being. He would show us how wood, plants, and natural light created homes where people thrived; they weren't just cardboard shapes in a 3D artist impression.

After a full day of this, I would head back home from my classes. I used to live with my family in a large flat on the seventh floor of a badly constructed 1970s building in the outskirts of Palermo. In spite of the mild external temperatures, the flat was cold in wintertime with no heating, to the point that I would sometimes go to bed wearing a woolly hat and scarf. In the summer, the flat grew hot thanks to the lack of insulation and the metal, single-glazed windows. The cheap facing of the walls crumbled in areas. My home wasn't very different from the majority of dwellings in my city and, in fact, in many other parts of Italy.

As you can imagine, those incredible buildings I saw in Europe and in my teacher's lessons were a far cry from what I was used to. But they had a lasting impact on me.

Graduation day approached. It was a mad rush to finish everything on time, from writing the last words of my dissertation, to polishing the accompanying drawings (I felt very modern indeed, using 2D CAD for the first time in my university course, alongside hand-drawn perspectives). Finally, I slipped into my new black suit and red t-shirt (I wanted to look like a proper architect) and visited the School of Architecture to present my thesis to the university committee.

It went remarkably well, and five and a half years of hard work paid off. I received top marks and a mention - to the elation and relief of my whole family, who sat behind me in the faculty's conference room.

Then reality hit.

A week after graduation, I was in the U.K. with the intention of staying. I had never even visited the U.K. before, but the thought of dealing with a toxic mix of backwards mentality, mafia, bureaucracy, and possibly having to strike dodgy compromises in order to work in Sicily didn't appeal to me in the least. I was a young woman and wanted to work in construction, a sort of prized cow in the U.K. at that time, but even more so back home where, unfortunately, the construction industry was lightyears away from the British scenario.

I remember weeping when I heard that three of my best friends were graduating too and I wasn't there with them to celebrate. Instead, I was sweeping floors in a Chinese restaurant late at night. The kitchen staff couldn't or wouldn't learn my name, so they called me Italy Two - as opposed to Italy One, my fellow Italian colleague who arrived there before me. To be fair, I couldn't speak English either at that point. Only a 23-year-old can move to a country where she doesn't even know how to reply to *thank you*.

Nonetheless, after a year of learning basic English, working in coffee shops in the morning, and labouring in restaurants at night, I managed to get a job in a very small but well-respected architectural firm in South London. I personally brought my CV to all the architectural firms in my area hundreds of times, and showed up at this particular architect's door four times at least. I got him by exhaustion, I believe. But, I was desperate to move on with my life, follow my calling, and use my degree.



Work was hard. I was the only employee, alongside my boss and his wife, who would work on the admin side of things. I admired my boss, an old-school guy who possessed magnificent ego and creativity in equal measures; he was a generous, welcoming, and genuine person, but he wasn't the easiest human being to deal with.

He couldn't understand that I was trying to learn a method of building that was completely different from what I'd studied in Italy. On top of that, my architectural school had been 95% theory and 5% practice – thank you, Italian university. At the office, our creativity was often killed by an obtuse or capricious client with more money than sense; by an engineer, who would try to temper in my boss' ambition; or by the local authority, who wouldn't approve our projects unless they conformed to the dull planning rules.

I began to wonder whether Zaha Hadid was an alien, who just dropped the Vitra Fire Station from her spaceship whilst altogether bypassing the local planning officer.

A year in, I was beginning to feel uninspired. After much deliberation, I decided to go back to what actually sparked joy in my architectural studies. I applied for a part-time MSc course at Oxford Brookes University in Energy Efficient and Sustainable Building. I commuted two days a week to Oxford from South London, whilst working at the architectural studio for the other three days.

The course reignited that excitement and feeling of purpose I was craving so desperately, and reminded me of my nutty lecturer's classes in those undergrad years. It felt wonderful to be part of a community of like-minded people, and a field trip to the Findhorn Ecovillage in Scotland sealed the deal for me. I wanted to create buildings that moved people to live the best, most inspired lives they could; designs that would mirror their owners in a symbiotic way.

A few months into my Master's, I found a new job in another small studio that claimed they had sustainability as a core value - and they would pay me double what I earned at my old place.

I soon discovered that, for them, sustainability was no more than a marketing claim - and quite at the bottom of my (three) bosses' priorities. It was another disappointment, but I didn't want to give up at the beginning of this new ad-

venture. Besides, I enjoyed my morning stroll through posh Chelsea, which felt a bit like being *Pretty Woman* without the budget.

The idiosyncrasies I found in my previous employment were exponentially bigger here, with less creativity, more frustration, worse stress, and constant worry around the new responsibilities I was given.

The straw that broke the camel's back was a job to refurbish six luxury bathrooms in a mansion in Chelsea. Our client was a strong-minded American lady, who obviously didn't trust us in the least. For the long meetings about the project, there were eight people around the table: one of my bosses and I; our client; the contractor and his assistant; two interior designers; and a personal advisor to our client.

All that, just to keep that same outdated design as before (flowery, fabric-upholstered walls, anyone?), just with new materials.

She wanted (and got in the end) a plastic tunnel that would take us from the front door, through the house, and to each bathroom. This prevented dust from settling on the other rooms. If you have seen E.T., you can picture this easily.

Six.

Flipping.

Bathrooms.

The lengthy discussions about where the toilet brushes should go, paired up with the sexist and patronising comments in the office and on-site, ended up being too much for me.

So that's when I decided to quit architecture for good and sent an email to BRE, asking how I could become a sustainability consultant. After all, BRE was the U.K. authority in sustainability in the built environment, so surely they knew how I could make the leap.

The reply back asked whether I had a CV that I could send through.

The next reply asked whether I wanted an interview. And that's how I got a job without even applying for it, working in the young and vibrant BRE tech-

nical team to help write the BREEAM guidance that we use today to assess sustainability in buildings.

I finally felt I was making a difference.

After nearly 12 great, mostly inspiring years there, I took a leap into the unknown and started Green Gorilla. I wanted to help fellow sustainability professionals feel more empowered via tailored, soft skills training and coaching.

I'm telling you my story for three reasons:

1. *You are not alone.* If you are a tree-hugger, be proud of it. My quest for purpose in my job led me to what I am today. It took me 15 years to get there, but I ended up where I wanted to be, and it feels good. It feels right. It feels like I'm doing what I am meant to be doing, and that I'm making a difference, in spite of daily hiccups.

As a sustainability professional, and as a human being in general, I realised that happiness at work depends on the gap between reality and our aspirations, values, and beliefs. The smaller the gap, the higher the sense of fulfilment and happiness.

In this book, I offer you ways to reduce that gap, bringing reality closer to your aspirations. You may not be able to completely change the world right now, but you can change the way you see and are seen by others. That will have a massive impact on your fulfilment and the difference you make in the long run.

2. *There will always be people less inspired than you, and that's okay.* Hopefully, through this book, you will work to own your inspiration, so that it refuels your passion and ability to infuse it with others. However, you'll need to accept that, sometimes, it's okay to move on. There are some people in the world for whom sustainability and the environment are not a concern, in spite of scientific evidence and obvious climate change events.

3. *You need to develop resilience.* The sustainability world can be tough, so the best way to achieve your goals is to keep pushing - despite setbacks. Whilst learning to walk, if a baby stopped getting up every time they fell, they'd never run. If I had kept working at a Chinese restaurant for 10 years, instead of spending every minute of my free time knocking at architectural firms' doors, or if I

stayed at my assistant architect job, feeling belittled and unfulfilled, I never would've started this profession. I wouldn't be where I am now, happily doing what I do, making my small but sure contribution to a better world.

I'm sure you've had your fair share of falling and getting up, so you can relate. However, if you're struggling where you are right now - if you think it's hard or impossible to be happy in your current situation - ask yourself:

*Does the thought of becoming a successful sustainability professional feel right to you?*

If it feels 'light in your heart', then just keep getting up. I bet you're closer to your goal than you think. All it takes is the right action steps.

Your grit - your passion and perseverance towards your long-term goal - will help you maintain the right path.

# PART 1





## CHAPTER 1

# Let's Start With You

You are working in sustainability because you believe in it.

Written like this, it sounds like a religion; and it sometimes is, judging from the animosity found in discussions with naysayers – sometimes even within our families. When I was told by a person I love deeply, *“You just sell hot air”*, my eyes nearly popped out of my head and I felt profoundly hurt.

Isn't it obvious that fossil fuels are polluting and adding unnecessary stress on the planet's delicate balance? Tipping it dangerously for generations to come, whilst renewable energy sources are not?

Isn't it obvious that clean is better than dirty? That reusing or recycling plastic, a material created using heaps of water and energy, is better than using it for 10 minutes and throwing it away, only to see it hanging around in the sea for the next 500 years, choking fish and turtles to death in the meantime?

Well, it turns out, no.

It isn't so obvious to many people.

## You Have to Deal with Naysayers

Perhaps you are currently frustrated with your clients, who aren't showing any interest in what you're trying to do. They may have to demonstrate that their building is constructed using certain sustainability principles, because of planning consent or corporate responsibility, but they may not believe in it.

They may think sustainability is *hot air* - that it's a waste of time and money.

Perhaps you had grand plans - such as making this project you're advising on a unique example of circular economy - but your client said, "*No, we don't have the budget or the time for it, we'll just do the sustainability assessment,*" and you find yourself ticking boxes. "*Yes, yes, no, no, no...*"

We will get into the 'why' some people are not interested in sustainability later, but for now, let's focus on you a bit more.

If it's obvious to you that living and doing business sustainably is a matter of common sense - that, in fact, there isn't another viable way of living and doing business for you - then that means sustainability is a value for you.

Values are ingrained in us. Although they can shift slightly in life, they are something we deeply believe in, so they tend to compose a vital part of our being.

That also means your profession tends to be less of a job and more of a passion.

Do you find yourself picking up litter as you walk the dog in the park? Do you recycle your supermarket receipts? Do you ensure your computer is off every night and that people in your household switch off the lights when they leave a room? Perhaps you own an electric car or have a Tesla on your wishlist?

If you deeply believe in it, and it's also part of your private, everyday life, then it's something that resonates profoundly in you. When it's part of you, it's a vocation - and that's a good thing to reconnect to if you're feeling the struggle of a daily grind with sceptical clients and colleagues.

## You Feel That You Are the Defender of Sustainability at Any Cost

At the moment, though, you might be struggling with something more personal. It's different than obnoxious clients, but it will kill your motivation all the same.

Perhaps you're one of those sustainability professionals that wears an armour to work every day. Like Don Quixote of La Mancha, YOU ignore the world as it is, ignore your clients' needs, and prefer to imagine that you're living out a knightly story. *"Yes! We need to save the world! We are the knights who will defeat our enemies and save the planet!"* But then you encounter your own windmills in the boardroom. They hit you hard. You don't know how to challenge them, so you collapse.

## The Daily Grind and Nitty-Gritty Got the Best of You

Or perhaps you take the big picture for granted, to the point where you no longer feel responsibility for pulling others onto your Noah's Ark. Instead, you focus on the minute, technical details, such as the stress of the environmental impact assessments, appraisals, or certifications.

## You Suffer From Impostor Syndrome

Or do you have a niggling doubt that you're not good enough? You want to change; to take ownership of your career, emotions, and behaviours; to *step up*... but, deep down, you don't think you have it in you. You are a technical person and an environmentalist. You may not see yourself as a leader (yet), or as a business person who can negotiate successfully, even about your paycheck.

## You Gave Into Doom and Gloom

Or perhaps you walk into the world defeated. After all, knowing too much about the grim stories - climate crisis, ocean pollution, mass species extinction, ozone depletion - can be a curse. So, you lost faith in changing the world one project at a time, one client at a time.



You ask yourself: What's the point?

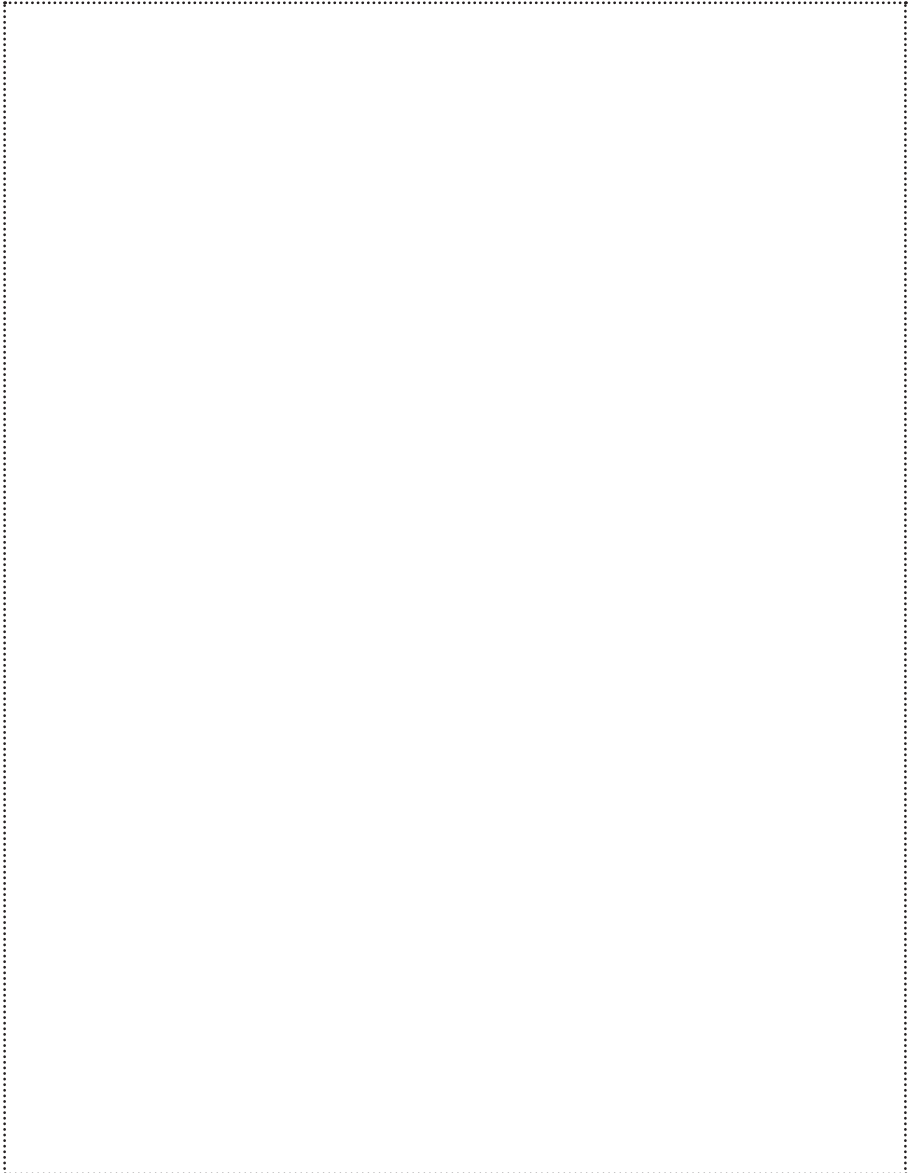
But it's not too late. It is possible to find your motivation again - to rediscover the fire that pushed you to choose this path, this career, this life, no matter how negative your circumstances or your own attitude looks right now.

How?

Let's explore the psychology behind certain characteristic behaviours of environmental professionals, and what we can do to change them.

## Key Points to Remember

Feel free to use this space for jotting down notes on your personal takeaways from this section.



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Sustainability Professional in a Rapidly  
Changing World*

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