

# Naturally Inspired Sustainability Leadership

A guide to change making for leaders and professionals who care about the climate and nature crises... even when it's not in your job description

 **Realise Earth**  
Naturally inspired sustainability leadership

  
greenminds

  
PLYMOUTH  
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**EUROPEAN UNION**  
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**Naturally Inspired Sustainability Leadership is for leaders and professionals who care about the climate and nature crises and want to be more effective agents of change for sustainability at work - even when it's not in your job description.**

**This guide is based on the leadership programme developed and led by Osbert Lancaster of Realise Earth for Green Minds.**

**Green Minds** is an ambitious, pioneering, 4 year programme (2019-2023) which aims to test new ways of thinking and acting for nature within the city of Plymouth by focusing on urban rewilding, creating green mindsets and taking a systems wide approach to land management.

[greenmindsplymouth.com](https://greenmindsplymouth.com)

**Realise Earth Ltd** are sustainability leadership specialists. We support the greatest untapped resource in tackling the climate and nature crises – leaders and professionals who care deeply and want their careers to be a force for good in the world.

[realise.earth](https://realise.earth)



# Why Naturally Inspired Sustainability Leadership?

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For too long working on sustainability has been restricted to specialists - directors, managers and consultants with explicit responsibility for sustainability, climate, environment, biodiversity and energy.

These are vital roles, but organisations, communities and society have been missing out on the skills and experience of other leaders and professionals, across organisations and sectors, who are motivated and well placed to make a real difference.

Despite the importance of technological solutions, at heart sustainability is a cultural issue. We will only succeed if we shift the culture in society and in our organisations.

Naturally Inspired Sustainability Leadership rests on three fundamental realities that are at odds with our culture:

## Reality 1

We are part of nature. But our culture leads us to think and behave as if we are separate from, and in control of, the rest of the living world. The solution is to develop a strong sense of 'nature connectedness', in ourselves and across society.

## Reality 2

Humans are naturally kind and caring. But our culture assumes people are selfish, reinforcing the worst in human nature. The solution is engage people's innate kindness and care, and raise awareness that most people are kind and caring.

## Reality 3

We can help create a better world. But our culture tells us that unless it's in our job description, sustainability is for our private lives. The solution is to understand how all of us who care can be change agents for sustainability.

# Why nature connectedness is crucial

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**The reality is that we are part of nature. But our culture leads us to think and behave as if we are separate from, and in control of, the rest of the living world.**

The problem is that feeling separate from the rest of the living world is at the root of the climate and nature crises – and the cause of much mental ill health.

The solution is to develop a strong sense of ‘nature connectedness’ – psychologically and emotionally feeling part of nature – in ourselves and across society. This is essential to tackling these crises, because:

## People with low nature connectedness tend to:

- Have poor mental health and be unhappy
- Feel that life is random and pointless
- Be self centred and unwilling to help others
- Behave in ways that damage the environment

## People with high nature connectedness tend to:

- Have good mental health and be happy
- Have a strong sense of meaning and purpose
- Be kind and helpful to others
- Behave in ways that are good for the environment

The result of more people feeling part of nature goes way beyond individual wellbeing. It creates change across society that not only make life better now, but also helps build the capacity and conditions for the transformation that is needed for sustainability:

### **Neighbourhoods & populations**

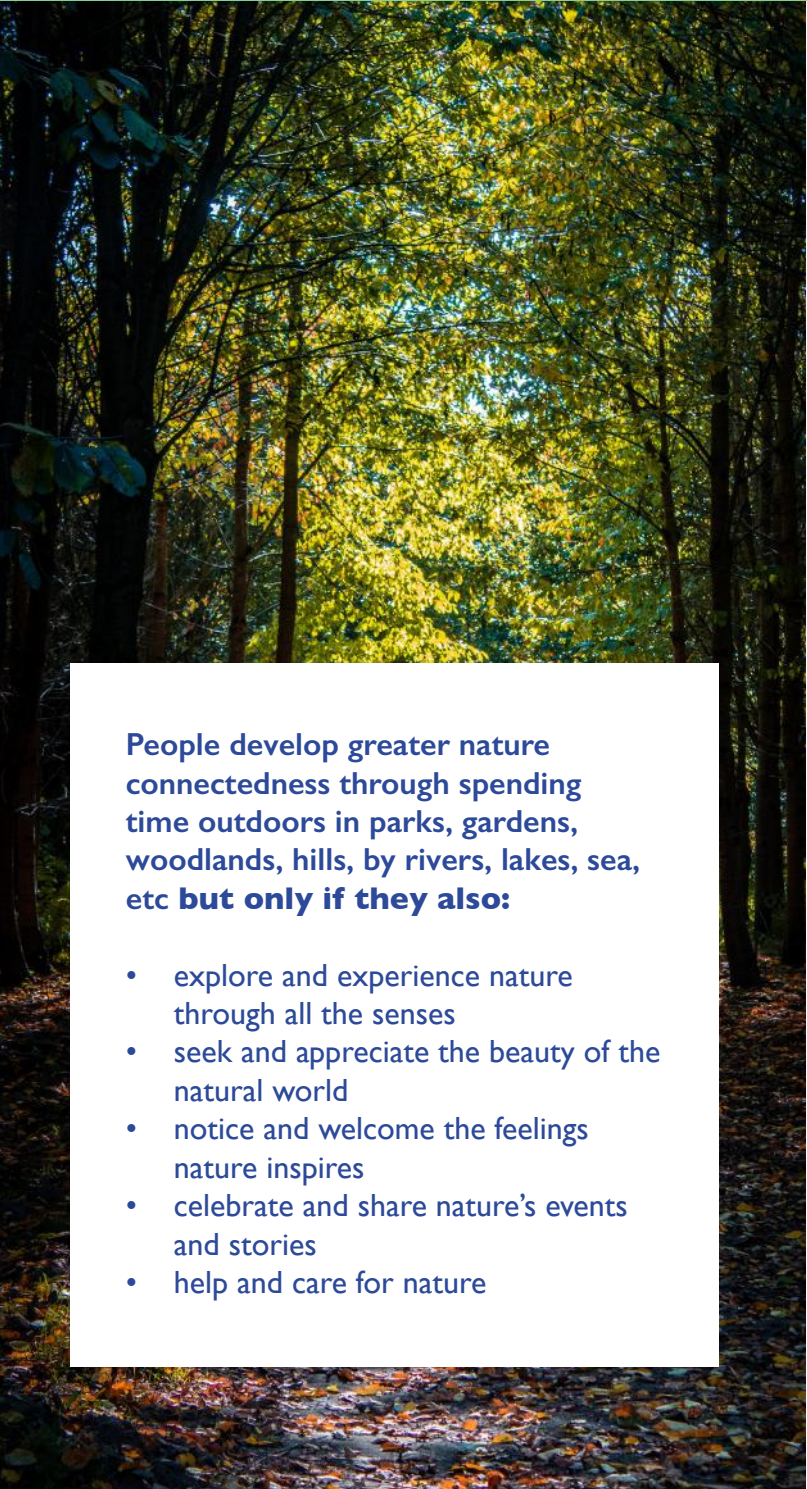
Greater well-being; more caring of people and places; more likely to support actions that tackle the social and environmental problems.

### **Leaders & professionals**

Greater commitment; less burnout; more likely to act for the greater good; more likely to seek solutions that work with, not against, nature.

### **Organisations & institutions**

Better places to work; more likely to align their purpose with local and global needs, restoring and regenerating the natural world.



Here's how you can embrace nature connectedness to help achieve your sustainability ambitions, whether you're a leader, professional or change maker.

### Look after yourself

- Spend some 'slow' time outdoors everyday experiencing and appreciating nature
- Get out into wilder places every few weeks
- Make time for deeper immersion in nature every few months
- Become involved in hands on care of nature

### Influence those around you

- Bring nature into informal and professional conversations: share your feeling and experiences, talk about the seasons and natural cycles
- Lead by example: create opportunities for colleagues to spend time outdoors, e.g. walking meetings and outdoor workshops

### Shape projects and places

- *Comms*: highlight and celebrate that we are part of nature
- *Events and places*: create opportunities for people to explore and appreciate nature
- *Projects*: seek out opportunities to develop projects that connect people with nature

People develop greater nature connectedness through spending time outdoors in parks, gardens, woodlands, hills, by rivers, lakes, sea, etc **but only if they also:**

- explore and experience nature through all the senses
- seek and appreciate the beauty of the natural world
- notice and welcome the feelings nature inspires
- celebrate and share nature's events and stories
- help and care for nature

# Why kindness is crucial

The reality is that humans are naturally kind and caring. But we live in a society where policy, media, education and business assumes people are essentially selfish, reinforcing the worst in human nature.

**The problem** is a vicious cycle that suppresses people's kindness, holding us back from tackling the climate and nature crises, social inequity and polarisation.

**The solution** is not only to engage people's innate kindness and care, but also to raise awareness that most people are actually kind and caring.

**The result** of more people being kind and caring, and believing that others are too, goes way beyond personal environmental and social action – it helps create the conditions for transformation.

## Neighbourhoods & populations

Greater well-being, more caring of people and places, more likely to support actions that tackle the social and environmental problems.

## Leaders & professionals

More likely to: act for the greater good; build trust and cooperation; develop projects that reward kindness and care, not selfishness.

## Organisations & institutions

Better places to work, more likely to align their purpose with building fairer, thriving and resilient communities and society.

Level of environmental & social...	People who are selfish	People who are kind and caring...	
		<i>but believe that most other people are selfish</i>	<i>and believe that most people are also kind &amp; caring</i>
<b>Concern</b>	Low	High	High
<b>Action</b>	Low	Low	High

People's innate care and kindness are reinforced and brought to the fore when they...

- experience care and kindness from the people around them
- have role models who exemplify care and kindness
- experience working practices and policies based on care and trust

People believe that others are also kind and caring when they...

- Become more aware of other's real values through exposure to evidence
- Experience the kindness of people they believe are selfish and uncaring
- Experience a culture that assumes people are generally kind and caring

Here's how you can embrace care and kindness to help achieve your sustainability ambitions, whether you're a leader, professional or change maker:

### **Exemplify care and kindness    Influence those around you**

- be fair and consistent in what you say and do, in every aspect of your work and life
- take a genuine interest in the people around you, discover what they care about
- understand people's needs and find ways to help them meet their needs
- Encourage discussion of issues that matter to people, make it 'normal to care'
- Create opportunities to share and discuss evidence that most people are kind and caring
- Avoid motivating people by appealing to financial self interest and status

### **Shaping policies and projects**

- **Policies:** review to reward caring, trust and collective impact over self interest
- **Comms:** engage people by appealing to their care for people, places and nature
- **Events, projects & places:** create opportunities to explore and express care and kindness



# How we can all be change agents

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The reality is that we can help create a better world, but our culture tells us that unless it's in our job description, sustainability is a personal matter of green consumerism and supporting campaigns. The problem is that the skills and experience of people who care deeply are often not applied to the greatest challenge of our times. So, feeling powerless, we suffer from eco-anxiety.

The solution is to understand how change happens, and how our actions can help create a better world. We can be sustainability change agents regardless of our job description. This is essential to tackling these crises, because:

**When we better understand how change happens and can be influenced we can:**

- apply our existing skills, experience & networks
- find the sweet spots where we make most difference
- design and deliver effective change strategies

**As effective change agents we will:**

- overcome eco-anxiety through effective action
- reinforce our commitment and avoid burnout
- inspire others to follow our lead

The result of more of us becoming skilful sustainability change agents isn't just more successful one-off projects. It also inspires and catalyses transformational change across society:

## **Neighbourhoods & populations**

Pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours spread more rapidly; services and facilities make it easier for people to make good choices.

## **Leaders & professionals**

Leaders & professionals: We are more effective at engaging others and changing organisational cultures and systems to favour more sustainable actions.

## **Organisations & institutions**

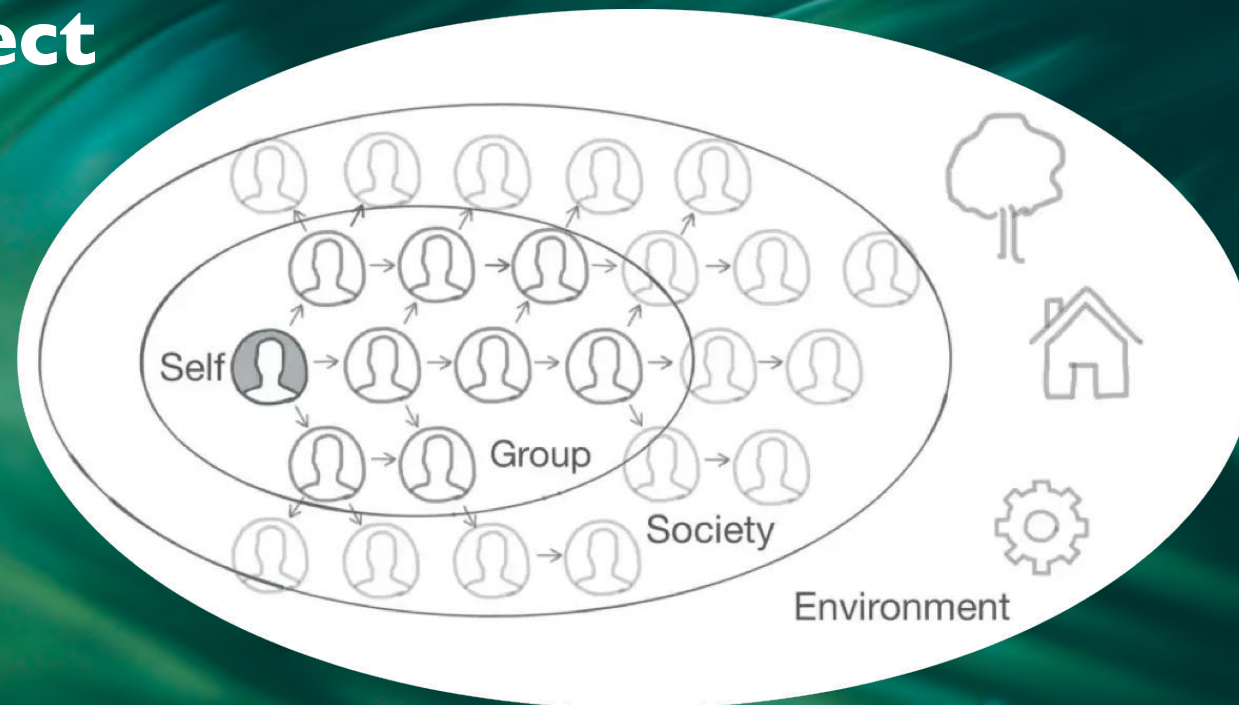
Culture, policies and practices make more sustainable actions the norm; decision making take greater account of sustainability impacts.

As leaders and professionals we can influence others around us through the ways we share our values and beliefs, and how we put them into practice in every aspect of our lives – the ripple effect.

Incremental change happens when new beliefs, attitudes and behaviours develop - and are then taken up by other people to spread through their group, and potentially to other groups (e.g. organisations) and across society – like ripples spreading out from a stone dropped in a lake.

The change is more likely to spread successfully if it “feels right”, “makes sense” and people have the skills, confidence and resources to adopt it.

## The ripple effect

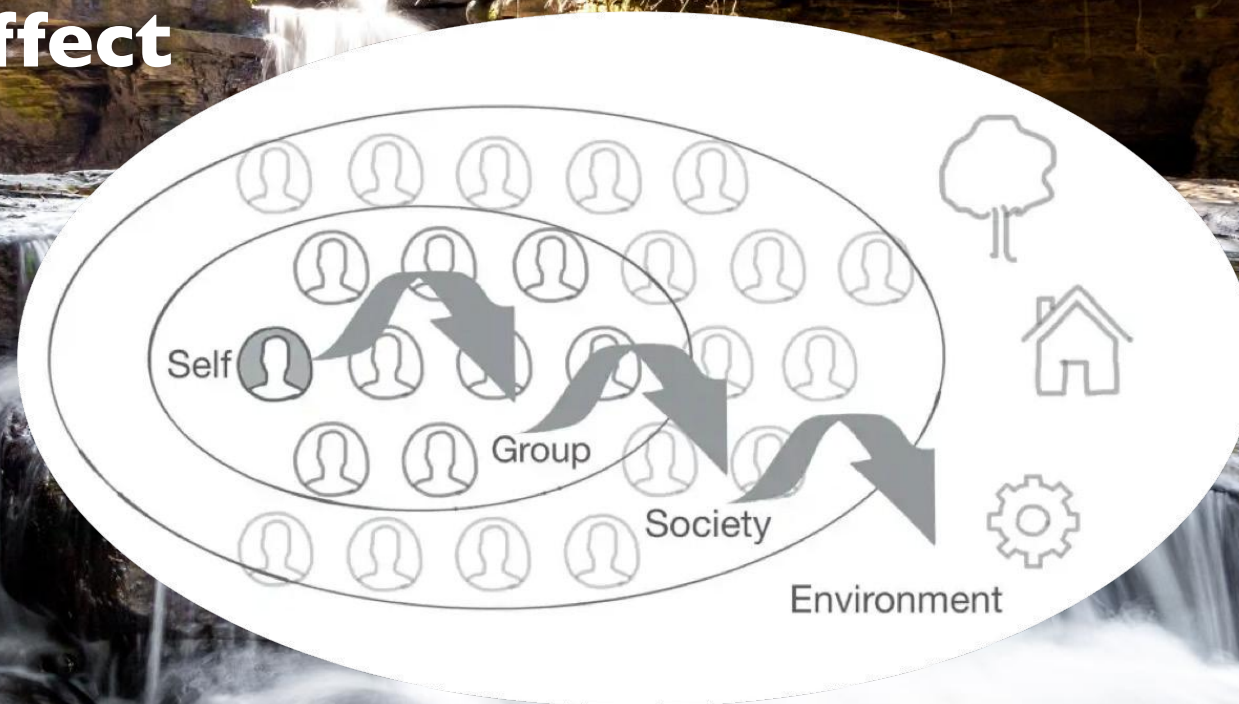


Working where we have control and influence in our organisations and networks, we can develop programmes, policies and procedures that encourage sustainable behaviours using the cascade effect.

System change happens when new policies, procedures, laws, technologies, infrastructure etc make sustainable behaviours easier and unsustainable behaviours more difficult - practically, financially and/or legally. Behaviours cascade across groups, organisations and society, like a river cutting a new channel after a flood.

Whether in an organisation or nation, changes are more likely to succeed if they are seen to be fair, worthwhile and realistic.

## The cascade effect



# Change agents at work

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Here are just some of the ways in which participants in the programme we ran for Green Minds are putting this approach into action...



# Katie Graham

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Katie Graham is a planning officer with Plymouth City Council. She is also a workplace wellbeing champion and has a personal interest in the role of green and blue spaces in mental health.

*“I sometimes feel my influence is limited to simply applying planning policies. I joined the programme to find ways to support nature through the planning system.”*

Katie saw an opportunity to use her wellbeing champion role as legitimate way of introducing nature connectedness into her work:

*“I’m now running outdoor nature connection sessions with my team and with colleagues across the department.”*

Katie runs the sessions at sites where planners’ work has helped protect, improve and create parks and public spaces. As a result participants not only enjoy greater wellbeing, they also see the impact their decisions and recommendations have on communities, wildlife and the environment.



*“Despite my fears that engaging with nature can seem childish, the sessions were received very positively – and they have opened up new ways of thinking and fresh conversations.”*

The participants’ fresh conversations and new thinking are likely to inspire and influence their colleagues through the Ripple Effect. Greater awareness and commitment is likely to lead to planning decisions that, through the Cascade Effect, lock in long term benefits for people and nature through better developments and infrastructure.

# Sarah Lee

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Sarah Lee is an architect at Stride Treglown. She's long been active on climate action in the industry, including launching Future Plymouth 2030 in 2020.

*“My appreciation of nature deepened during lockdown and highlighted the importance of addressing the biodiversity crisis alongside the climate crisis in all aspects of our life and work.”*

Sarah is using the Ripple Effect to subtly spread the approach through her work and her professional networks:

*“As architects, trusted client advisors and design team leaders we can use our position of influence and continuity through projects to ensure that nature and biodiversity is respected and considered from day one of any project that we assist with, rather than being considered a bolt-on or nice-to-have.”*

*“Making better decisions from the start of projects uses the Cascade Effect to lock in long term benefits for people and nature.*

*With the help of the programme I have been able to bring nature into our decision making by having better, more effective conversations – without being seen as the ‘hippy’ in the room. Appealing to people’s kindness, caring and generosity has been a big part of this.*

*Knowing more about how to make change has given me a feeling of empowerment. I’ve taken a softly, softly approach with introducing this to my area of work. I’ve been really pleased to see the naturally inspired leadership approach has worked and is valued.”*



# Karen Pilkington

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Karen Pilkington is a founder and a director of The Village Hub in Plymouth, which supports residents to take action in their local neighbourhood.

*“I was inspired to participate in the programme because of my interest in inclusive leadership that builds communities with, and not for, people.*

*The framework has allowed me to identify where I could be most effective within my neighbourhood system to support people and places to flourish. I’ve also learnt that despite many differences that there is lots of crossover with the work of other participants – and we’re now collaborating with several of those projects.*

*It’s had a profound impact on my relationship with the wider natural world. I’ve started noticing and learning from nature and it’s inspired a whole new way of thinking about my organisation’s governance...*

*A woodland doesn’t develop through one dominant tree with a 3-year strategy or top-down plan. It evolves organically over time with lots of relationships between species, each having a different, but equally important role.*

*It has made me think about how we could do community work in a different way. How can it be less hierarchical and less focussed on endless short term projects that don’t have a lasting effect? How can it be more about natural development with some seasons that are slower, and some with more growth and action?”*



# Chris Smith

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Chris Smith is subject lead, pre-degree, at Arts University Plymouth (formally Plymouth College of Art). AUP is a Green Minds partner. Chris has been working to embed action and learning for sustainability and ecological restoration into courses, and latterly across the whole institution, for 17 years.

*“At last I seem to be getting some real traction and influence in this and the programme has help me identify the parts of our organisational system where I could have the most effective influence.*

*The networks and relationships developed across the programme have also been really helpful in linking in students and course leaders to real projects on the ground in Plymouth. The students’ experiences of engaging with communities and with nature will ‘ripple’ through their future work. Similarly, the course leaders’ experiences will also create opportunities to incorporate more such experiences in future courses.*

*One of my highlights has been our own organisational change, which now recognises environmental justice as a priority, alongside social justice.”*



*“The world needs creatives now, more than ever. It is a defining proposition from Arts University Plymouth to put art, design and creativity at the centre of the world’s ‘wicked’ problems - the arts encapsulate how we relate to the world as human beings and rebuilding our relationship with the environment is fundamental. Green Minds is central to the college’s mission of creative learning and commitment to social and environmental justice.”*  
- Stephen Felmingham, Academic Dean, Arts University Plymouth

This commitment will influence policies, procedures and practices that will ‘cascade’ new ways of doing things throughout the institution.

# Oli Mackie

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Oli Mackie, is strategic service manager, NSPCC.

*“As strategic lead to help prevent child abuse in Plymouth I was interested in how connection to nature could help across many societal issues. Whilst I felt that connecting our services to natural spaces in Plymouth would be really beneficial I felt I lacked the environmental knowledge and networks on the ground to make this happen.*

*The systems approach was a bit of a lightbulb moment in recognising that we need both direct action of those things we could easily influence (the Ripple Effect) as well as pushing for more strategic change (the Cascade Effect).*

*We’ve also recognised common ground with different sectors and services in the city and built relationships to help us adapt our service delivery such as our family based work around Ernsettle Creek.*

*Even just having more meetings outdoors has been a small but important step in changing our work to support more nature connection.*

*The programme really helped me focus and best direct my energies to influence change that support children, families through nature connection in Plymouth.”*



## I'm Osbert Lancaster, director of Realise Earth and co-founder of the Sustainability Leadership Network.



I really do encourage you to try putting this approach into practice. Even better, share the guide with colleagues and create a team of allies who can support each other. Even having just one other person who you can talk to, plot and plan with, will make a huge difference.

Start with the aspects you feel most drawn to and think of it as an experiment – try things, see what works, reflect, adjust, and try again. This action learning approach was at the heart of the programme I ran for Green Minds.

The Sustainability Leadership Network that we host is international community of professionals championing sustainability at work – even when it's not in the job description. It's a great source of further resources and powerful peer support. Check it out, it might be what you need to get you started and having the greatest impact for your time and energy.

Our aim, with this project for Green Minds, as with all our work, is to strip away the complexity of change making for sustainability, and to offer you clear and practical actions that you can start using into your work right away – even when sustainability isn't in your job description.

If you are interested in integrating the Naturally Inspired approach into your existing leadership programmes, or running a programme in your organisation, network or sector, please get in touch:

- if you're in Plymouth, contact Jemma Sharman at [greenmindsplymouth.com/contact](https://greenmindsplymouth.com/contact)
- anywhere else, contact me

Good luck on your sustainability leadership journey! If you have questions, just ask – and do let me know how you get on.

**Osbert Lancaster**

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