

# Sustainability Project Champions as Environmental Leaders in a City Organization: Driving the Urban Circular Economy

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## Abstract

While the role of projects in sustainability change is widely recognized, the understanding of project managers' behaviour in sustainability projects is limited. We examine project champions who act without hierarchical and authoritative power as environmental leaders and drive sustainability-related changes in the mindsets of actors and in city administration. Based on longitudinal action research, we elaborate on the practices and characteristics of project champions in initiating and advancing the circular economy in a city organization. Our study contributes to the intersection of research on project champions and environmental leaders by increasing the understanding of the ways through which champions develop their potency to promote sustainability in the course of the project.

## Keywords

Project leadership, environmental leadership, champion, project champion, case study research

## Introduction

Research on project management and sustainability is growing steadily, and the role of projects in sustainability change is widely recognized (Aarseth et al., 2017; Huemann & Silvius, 2017; Kiani Mavi et al., 2021). The integration of project management and sustainability poses an interesting contradiction, as project management is focussed on precise objectives and time-bound activities, whereas sustainability is concerned with long-term challenges (Sabini et al., 2019). Understanding a project manager's decision-making process is important, as it is the project manager who contributes the most to the design of the sustainability targets in projects and bears the responsibility for the sustainability of the project (Magano et al., 2021; Sabini et al., 2019). Despite the important role of project managers in sustainability, there is a limited understanding of project managers' behaviour as environmental leaders (Castro Madureira et al., 2022; Sabini & Alderman, 2021; Silvius & Schipper, 2020).

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To address this research gap, we focus on project champions. They are leaders who are influential in driving change (Mould et al., 2020), and their approaches range from political action to grassroots movements (Tenali & McManus, 2022). Being a champion does not require a formal leadership position. Champions drive transitional change by strengthening relationships, establishing a collective commitment to action (Lindsay et al., 2019), building coalitions, and mobilizing and convincing existing networks to participate (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Pesch et al., 2017; Teicher, 2022). Establishing a collective commitment to action requires skills in influencing others and using various communication and persuasion strategies (Mejia, 2019; Mukhtarov et al., 2019; Rochell et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2011). Previous research has shown that the leadership activities of project champions are driven by their intrinsic motivation and that their commitment, personal values, personality characteristics, leadership behaviours, and strategic networking skills make their leadership efforts successful (Taylor et al., 2011). We elaborate on these features of project champions in a sustainability project and analyse how project champions drive change in the permanent organization. We draw from the literature on environmental leadership to position our study at the intersection of project champions and transitional change for sustainability (Martiskainen & Kivimaa, 2018).

Studies on champions have been conducted in the contexts of health management (e.g., Allen et al., 2021; Hunt & Kirsch, 2020; Orkaby et al., 2021) and technology (e.g., Chirchir et al., 2021; Lefley & Maresova, 2021; Venkataraman et al., 2019). The literature on project champions as environmental leaders has shown that sustainability champions share some common characteristics: they are excited about sustainability, have a passion for the work, and are able to influence others to have the same passion (Mejia, 2019; Mukhtarov et al., 2019). Previous research has also shown that champions play an important role in driving the requirements of sustainable public procurement by influencing the organizational culture and behaviour in large infrastructure projects (Lingegård et al., 2021). Further, studies have shown that there are downsides to the lack of champions in sustainability projects. Corbett et al. (2018) discovered that a lack of a champion to give voice to the natural environment leads to priority being given to financial and market-driven considerations in decision-making. The lack of a champion has also been shown to derail plans in the application phase (Raum et al., 2019).

We present a case study on a sustainability project of a city. We conducted a 2-year (2019–2021) action research study (Cassell & Johnson, 2006) on a project that focussed on advancing the urban circular economy with the aim of creating a partnership model for sustainable neighbourhoods in three Finnish cities: Tampere, Espoo, and Turku. The project invited companies, research organizations, and residents to participate in urban living lab pilots to test the principles of carbon neutrality and the circular economy in urban development neighbourhoods. The project team, consisting of a project manager and project coordinator, was committed to setting ambitious goals beyond the formal scope of the project. They did not have a formal power position in the permanent organization, as they had been hired for a short-term, externally funded project to advance carbon neutrality and a circular economy in the city organization. Our study spanned the entire two-year life of the project, and thus we were able to explore what the project team did in the project on a day-to-day basis.

Our study on champions in a sustainability project in a city organization brings new insights into the behaviour of project champions as environmental leaders in city administration. The study contributes to the intersection of project management and environmental leadership, first, by engaging in a micro-level inspection of contemporary project leadership (Gerald & Söderlund, 2018) and presenting a rich empirical analysis of the practices and characteristics of project champions. Second, our study increases the understanding of project champions as environmental leaders, who initiate and drive sustainability change at the individual and organizational levels in the permanent organization.

The study is organized as follows. First, we review the existing literature on project champions as environmental leaders. Second, we introduce the empirical context of our study and describe the data collection and analysis methods. Third, we elaborate on the characteristics, leadership behaviours, and strategic networking of project champions in a city organization and the ways in which they drive change in the city administration. We conclude by presenting the contributions to the literature on project champions in sustainability change and environmental leadership.

## **Project Champions as Environmental Leaders**

We consider project champions to be environmental leaders, drawing from the definition of Andersson and Bateman (2000), who said that such champions are individuals who ‘convince and enable organization members to turn environmental issues into successful corporate programs and innovations’. Environmental leadership may involve leaders taking a role outside of their official role description, thereby acting as champions who initiate change in the organization (Taylor, 2012). Many environmental initiatives have been championed by individuals who lack positional power and are on a lower level in the organizational hierarchy (Gattiker & Carter, 2010).

Environmental leadership has been studied, for example, in the context of conservation leadership (Webb et al., 2022), environmentally sustainable businesses (e.g., eco-tourism) (Chou et al., 2021), green agriculture (Pan et al., 2021), different areas of industry (Biedenkopf et al., 2019; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2018), and infrastructure and energy (Haas & Sander, 2020; Saha, 2020; Xavier et al., 2017). The existing research on environmental leadership is divided into macro- and micro-level approaches. The macro-level studies have examined countries (Klock, 2005; Maddock, 2013; Moni, 2009; Taylor, 2006), organizations (Chen, 2011; Flannery & May, 1994; Morison & Brown, 2010), and companies (Bailey, 1997; Davidson, 1994; Rice, 2003) as environmental leaders. Meanwhile, the micro-level research has examined the environmental leadership of top-level managers (e.g., Cong et al., 2014; Graves et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2020), students (e.g., Blythe & Harré, 2020; Selby et al., 2020), and individuals (Curtin & Jia, 2020) and how environmental leadership affects employees’ pro-environmental behaviour (Omarova & Jo, 2022; Xu et al., 2022). However, these studies have failed to explore how environmental leaders who do not have hierarchical authoritative power to give orders or delegate change-related activities to engage with different actors in collective action.

The factors affecting the effectiveness of champions in promoting sustainable policies and projects are divided into individual, group-based, and contextual factors (Taylor, 2012). On the individual level, there are both personal characteristics and leadership behaviours that are common among successful champions. The personal characteristics are related to the personalities, knowledge, and personal values of champions. Meanwhile, their key leadership behaviours are related to, for example, building shared visions, influencing, communicating, and questioning the status quo (Gattiker et al., 2014; Mejia, 2019; Mukhtarov et al., 2019; Rochell et al., 2022; Taylor, 2012). An example is Mukhtarov et al. (2019) study on champions in the sustainable urban drainage system context. They showed that the champions worked in close collaboration to build greater acceptance of sustainable urban drainage systems through different communication and persuasion strategies.

The group-level factors are related to how champions are able to utilize their relationships with executive champions to influence senior decision-makers and build knowledge, networks, and power (Taylor, 2012; Van de Meene et al., 2020). For instance, Mejia (2019) studied the hospitality industry and described how champions propel green technology user behaviour. The personal networks of people, both inside and outside an organization, have been shown to be the most effective source of information

for champions when they scan the environment for new ideas (Howell & Shea, 2001; Van de Meene et al., 2020). The contextual factors include organizational culture and values, support from peers and senior leaders, and the ability to bridge organizations and open windows of opportunity in a changing environment (Taylor, 2012). Although the organizational context affects how successful champions will be in their influencing efforts, the skilful use of influencing tactics may mitigate the effect of less favourable environments (Gattiker et al., 2014), where the champions may face resistance.

## Methodology

The case studied here is a project that focussed on the urban circular economy (Williams, 2021), with the aim of creating a partnership model for sustainable neighbourhoods in three Finnish cities. The purpose of the partnership model was to define the operating modes for cooperation between the cities, citizens, companies and researchers to implement circular economy principles in planning the infrastructure, services, and construction in the selected neighbourhoods. The goal of the project was to produce a platform model for carbon-neutral neighbourhoods whereby the material flows needed for the growing cities would circulate as resource-wisely as possible. The project lasted two years from August 2019 to September 2021.

We studied the project in its host city of Tampere, where it operated most intensively by (1) focussing on neighbourhood experiments together with multiple stakeholder groups and (2) promoting the idea of the circular economy among city administration. This dual task was ideal for our research purpose because it required the project to work with and across different sectors and municipal departments to facilitate interaction and innovative thinking between them. The targeted issues included building urban infrastructure, creating public–private collaboration, and developing elements for the city’s circular economy strategies. The project had to tackle administrative silos, lock-in practices, and traditional, linear economic thinking, which are major barriers to circular economy transformations in city organizations (Paiho et al., 2020).

Meeting the project team frequently and forming a trusting environment for a long-term action research process enabled us to collect a rich, in-depth data about the team’s everyday actions. Bi-weekly meetings were held with the project management team (project manager and project coordinator) throughout the project. During the meetings, the project team began by describing the recent occurrences in their work (and the researchers listened like interviewers), whereafter the project team and the researchers (three researchers from two different universities) moved on to general discussion and interpretation. The data of this case study consist of 30 meetings (90 min each, including interviews and discussions, recorded and transcribed). Due to the coronavirus disease pandemic, the meetings were mostly conducted via Teams.

The meeting transcriptions were analysed using inductive content analysis to identify patterns, themes, assumptions, and meanings from the conversations (Berg & Lune, 2017). The analysis followed an iterative interpretation process to generate categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). One researcher performed data coding using basic computing tools, and the codes were discussed and revised by all authors in recurrent meetings.

In the first round of analysis, we identified a variety of ways of working that the project team members utilized in the city administration. These included communicating about the project as extensively as possible, meeting various actors regularly, finding the right people, networking, bringing together actors who had not been interacting with one another but whose co-operation was necessary to enable change, considering everyday obstacles together, and involving different actors in the activities of the project.

The project team members also took actions that deviated from the normal practices in the permanent organization. For example, they asked how others felt about issues related to change, questioned why things were being done in a certain way and why they could not be done differently, brought up new ideas and thoughts, sought to identify boundaries, brought cues into the discussions (e.g., things borrowed from other discussions), broke boundaries, and built trust. The second round of analysis focussed on how the project team worked in the context of the organization and dealt with the values, attitudes, and prevalent practices of the organization. An additional round of analysis was performed for this study to identify which of the project team's ways of working could be considered to be personal characteristics and leadership behaviours specific to champions.

## **Findings**

The results of this study show that the personal characteristics of the project team, engagement in leadership behaviours, and strategic networking concur with what previous studies have reported to be typical for champions (Gattiker et al., 2014; Taylor, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). The findings show that a project team that lacks positional power and is on a lower level of hierarchy (Gattiker & Carter, 2010; Taylor, 2012) is able to achieve sustainability change in an organization by motivating and influencing other actors to collective action (Gallagher, 2012). In the above text, we intentionally used the phrase 'personal characteristic of the project team'. It refers to our specific finding that the two members were a tightly knit team. While they had different educational and professional background without a mutual working history, their different competencies and similar ambition level toward sustainability completed each other remarkably well. In the following, we will elaborate on the results of the empirical analysis of the practices and personal characteristics of the project champions and show how the project champions drove change at the individual and organizational levels in the permanent organization.

### *Personal Characteristics*

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the project team was their motivation and determination. Similarly, Taylor (2012) found that strong motivation and personal values were common personal characteristics of champions. The strong motivation of the project team to develop a more sustainable society is visible in the following excerpts:

That you really think that you can be included in the puzzle where this society is steered to a more sustainable direction, there's nothing better. (Team member B)

The motivation for both of us comes from the enthusiasm to develop the society. (Team member A)

The project team was very persistent, or as the members described themselves, stubborn, in driving change. This is consistent with previous research that has found project champions to be resilient and persistent during challenging periods and to have a passion for the cause (Webb et al., 2022). In addition to reaching the formal goals stated in the project plan, they were determined to achieve change in the organization that would last even after the project had ended. The following excerpts highlight the importance of determination and persistence as characteristics of a project team:

We have stubbornly decided to go through difficulties and do things so that they will really be put into practice in the line organization. (Team member A)

You have to be really persistent. They think you're naïve if you say that you want to change the mode of operating in the city organization. Still, you need to have a high ambition level if you want to achieve something. (Team member A)

They also had a positive attitude towards challenges, stating that they even embraced them, which is in line with champions' typical personal characteristics of being open to new experiences and having a relatively low level of agreeableness (Taylor, 2012).

I am interested in the challenging spots as in those spots we get our hands on to how we can solve them. (Team member A)

Everything can be done differently. I guess that's where it comes from, whatever challenges there are, they can be constructed differently. (Team member B)

### *Leadership Behaviours*

The project team put considerable effort into communicating with different stakeholders, which is a typical leadership behaviour of champions (Taylor, 2012). The first step in the project was finding the right people to be able to initiate the project. The second step was to bring all these people together to work towards a common goal. One of the project team members described this communication:

We need to be tactical so that we get the people at the table, and we need to be able to facilitate a meeting so that we get an outcome. We need to meet the right people at the right time, and bureaucracy also defines our schedules quite a lot. (Team member B)

The project team described how they had to constantly sell their ideas to others. Selling environmental issues (e.g., through influence tactics) is a typical behaviour of champions (Taylor, 2012). The following excerpt shows how selling the ideas was necessary even when the development initiative was based on the needs of the organization:

Even when it is a question of the internal development of the organization, we have to force and sell ideas, even though the project is built on their needs. (Team member B)

Communication was important for the project team to get people in the permanent organization to work together, which had not always been the case in the hierarchical and compartmentalized city organization. This not only required influence to be exerted in different directions and across different levels of the organization but also the use of a variety of influencing tactics, such as questioning and challenging the status quo (Taylor, 2012). The following excerpts are examples of the project team's efforts to break boundaries, bring different actors to work together, and inspire new ideas through questioning:

We have approached different actors openly although we know that there is a certain historical baggage in the organization and development work has been done as a specific group. (Team member B)

We ask why it is like this, why things have been done like this, why things have not progressed and could they be done differently. (Team member A)

The project team made significant efforts to address different people in a manner that would build trust and interest to participate in dialogue. When difficulties in communication arose, they changed the



communication style flexibly. The project team members utilized external feedback to reflect their style of communication. For example, when one of the project team members received feedback indicating they were too talkative and informal, they changed their approach and communication style accordingly, as the following excerpt shows:

(Name) gave me personal feedback that it is good to remember how to speak with different people, it is not always good to be so talkative and informal ... so afterwards we pondered how important it is how we convey the message to people. (Team member A)

Further, the project team utilized different terms tactically, such as changing the name of the market dialogue to the partnership dialogue and the circular economy roadmap to the circular economy plan, as they knew that these new terms will refresh discussion and would be better received by certain stakeholders and the city organization. This is in line with the previous literature (Taylor, 2012) on how champions package environmental issues, for example, by framing them in specific ways.

### ***Strategic Networking***

The project team had official goals in their project plan, but in addition, they had their own goal of achieving long-lasting change in the city organization's operating mode. They were highly motivated and ambitious and took on roles that were beyond their official role descriptions (Taylor, 2012), thus acting as emergent environmental leaders. The more the team members were able to convince and engage with actors on different levels of the organization, the more they were assisted in achieving the goals, both on a practical work level and on a decision-making level.

Building networks involved spanning the organizational boundaries and creating relationships that involved trust and openness to new ideas (Mukhtarov et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2022). The following excerpt elaborates the importance of network reach and a deep understanding of the social functioning of the permanent organization:

We have good networks in the city organization; we know who to ask, who to include in the messages, and how to formulate the messages. (Team member B)

Exerting influence and using influencing tactics were part of the project team's strategic networking (Pesch et al., 2017; Taylor, 2012; Teicher, 2022). The project team exerted influence on many levels—with their peers and with decision-makers at the local and national levels—by making personal contacts, organizing meetings and workshops, and giving speeches at different events. They were strategic in the formation of their network. At the beginning of the project, the project team focussed on identifying change agents who could support the project team in their endeavours to achieve the goals of the project. The excerpt below illustrates the perceived importance of finding people who can support changes in the permanent organization:

We ask who the good people are. You need to be able to pick the people who are favourable towards development. (Team member A)

The project team noted that these change agents were from all hierarchical levels, including both peers and senior decision-makers, as the following excerpt shows:

About 20. They're from all levels of hierarchy. Maybe 30 to 40 per cent are managers, and the rest are those who do the practical work. You need to have managers, otherwise nothing moves forward. (Team member A)

Once the network had been formed, the project team utilized it both for getting the practical work done and influencing the decision-makers in the organization to drive the strategic goals of the project.

### *Project Champions as Drivers of Organizational Change*

The project team members observed change happening in the permanent organization as the project progressed. They gradually noticed incremental changes in the mindsets and rhetoric of the different stakeholders. The excerpt below shows that the project team paid close attention to who started repeating the project's message.

[Name] had talked about a preliminary, consistent market dialogue on two different occasions. (Team member B)

The partnership dialogue (replacing market dialogue) was one of the concepts that the project team introduced to the stakeholders, and the term was persistently repeated until it became part of the regular vocabulary of the stakeholders. Moreover, due to the persistence of the project team, they were also able to broaden and bring new angles to the different actors' thinking, thereby changing not only their rhetoric but also their mindset, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

[Name]'s perspective has clearly widened, and this is where our project and other actors have succeeded. The [circular economy] roadmap has also started to appear in the discussions, and this is due to the fact that we have been bombarding and repeating the message together with [Names]. (Team member B)

The mindset change could also be seen in how the different stakeholders of the project started to rethink their ways of working. The city organization was hierarchical and compartmentalized, but the project team was able to bring different actors together, as one of the project team members notes in the following excerpt:

There are these 'aha!' moments. For example, a week ago, at the infrastructure event, there were many silent moments, and then people started to think that maybe we should invite new actors in the co-development. (Team member B)

This was one example of several cases where the actors started to reconsider the idea that working together with new actors might be beneficial for both the project and the impact of the project team's strategic networking. The project team's persistence in questioning and challenging the status quo was one of the key factors in getting the decision-makers to ponder how things could be done differently. The project team was sometimes even surprised by how they managed to get some decision-makers to support their project goals. As the project progressed, the changes that were considered more incremental in the beginning sometimes turned out to be bigger leaps towards achieving the project's goals. The project team described how, suddenly, the work to establish a circular economy roadmap (later rephrased as a circular economy plan) for the city paid dividends after it had initially seemed like they were facing a brick wall. This was the result of the project team's strategic networking, as they were able to find people at different levels of the hierarchy to participate in achieving the project's goals and speak for the project team on different occasions when decisions were made.



The impact of the project was significant in the city of Tampere. Before the project started, one of the project team members conducted a report on the current state of the circular economy in the city. The results of the report showed that the circular economy was not systematically discussed in the city organization, and the actors were not even aware of what the term meant. Talk about the circular economy was mainly focussed on waste management. By the end of the project, the project team had executed several pilot projects in the Hiedanranta area and launched a partnership dialogue that would act as a tool for circular economy collaboration between the city and companies. The circular economy plan for Tampere was launched in the autumn of 2022.

## **Discussion**

Our study involved an in-depth analysis of the personal characteristics, leadership behaviours, and strategic networking of project champions working on sustainability change in a city organization. The results show that, in addition to the official goals, an important feature of championing was that the project team had their own ambitious goals of achieving long-lasting sustainability change in the city organization's operating mode. These ambitious personal sustainability goals motivated championing behaviour and assuming roles that were outside their official role descriptions (Taylor, 2012), thus acting as environmental leaders.

Our analysis shows that a project champion is a developing role. In our case, the project champions grew into their roles as environmental leaders during the project. In the beginning of the project, the project team members focused on gathering information and getting to know the different actors by having individual meetings with them. Instead of offering solutions, the project team asked many questions about what was working well and what was not. The project team also noticed the importance of reflection and changing the course when needed. This is something they implemented throughout the project, with each other as well as with the research team and through seeking feedback from other actors in the city administration. As the project progressed, the project team started to bring together different actors, organize workshops, and offer new ideas through these events. The project team developed a good understanding of the operating environment and the actors in their network and were able to utilize communication and influencing tactics to tap into the change agents in the permanent organization when needed. This enabled the project team to advance the pilot projects and sub-projects, such as infrastructure projects, in the city organization. By developing a deep understanding of the bureaucracy, getting to know the organizational actors and their informal roles in the city organization, and engaging in strategic networking that included creating connections with the top-level managers in the city organization, the project team members were able to refer to the strategy papers that the city had committed to and tackle the bureaucracy while advancing the circular economy plan in the city.

Our analysis shows that through championing, the project managers were able to break through barriers in the compartmentalized city organization, bring together different actors and engage them in a collective action, and drive change in the organization at the individual and organizational levels. These are changes required in city organizations to stimulate transitional change toward sustainability (Paiho et al., 2020). Our study increases the understanding of project managers' behaviour with regard to addressing sustainability in the project (Castro Madureira et al., 2022; Sabini & Alderman, 2021; Silvius & Schipper, 2020). Further, it shows the ways in which championing project managers become influential in driving a transitional change (Lindsay et al., 2019; Mould et al., 2020).

The study contributes to the environmental leadership literature (Block & Paredis, 2013) by elaborating how project champions act as environmental leaders in a sustainability project in a public sector

organization. Earlier micro-level studies have examined the environmental leadership of top-level managers, students, and individuals and how environmental leadership affects employees' pro-environmental behaviour (e.g., Blythe & Harré, 2020; Curtin & Jia, 2020; Jiang et al., 2020; Omarova & Jo, 2022; Roberts et al., 2020; Selby et al., 2020). However, those studies failed to explain how environmental leaders who do not have hierarchical power engage organizational actors in collective action to facilitate sustainability transitions.

## Conclusion

This case study examined the personal characteristics, leadership behaviours, and strategic networking of project champions who drove sustainability change in a city organization. The two-year longitudinal case study involved bi-weekly meetings with the project team members, which allowed us to gain an in-depth view of the project team's working practices. The findings highlight the ways in which both the personal characteristics and the leadership behaviours of project champions enable sustainability change in an organization. In our case organization, sustainability change took place at both the individual and organizational levels and affected both the mindsets of people and the operating practices of the city organization to drive an urban circular economy. As environmental leaders, the project champions were able to make incremental changes and long-term impacts on urban sustainability. Two aspects emerged as important regarding the success of project champions. First, they had ambitious goals and intrinsic motivation to drive the sustainability change. Second, they grew their role as project champions throughout the project.

The limitation of this study is that it was solely focussed on the experiences of project team members and did not include other actors in their network. Further studies are needed to examine the effects of group-level and contextual factors on project championship. As a managerial implication, we conclude that the project champions in our study demonstrate the importance of personal commitment, project management skills, and a deep understanding of the permanent organization for successfully driving sustainability change in organizations.

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