Book Guide

DEFINE TO ACHIEVE

CHAPTER FIVE

PRACTICAL SUSTAINABILITY

How-to Guide:
Define to Achieve

Chapter 5

Jumping into sustainability without shared definitions leads to missteps like scope creep, poor communication, and wasted effort. This guide helps your team align on the language that will drive your sustainability success.

"You will not be able to solve any sustainability problem unless you first define what that problem is and what it means to your organization." (Practical Sustainability, p. 98)

Foundation Questions

Answer the following to establish a shared understanding before defining individual concepts.

1. What is sustainability?

2. What does sustainability mean to your organization?

3. How does your organization define what is sustainable and what is not?

Why Definitions Matter

Poorly defined sustainability efforts lead to:

- Misaligned priorities
- Ineffective programs
- Burnout and team attrition

"You can avoid these common problems by thoroughly defining the issue your organization will work on... Scope creep is real." (Practical Sustainability, p. 99)
Instead, use your own definitions.
"There is no wrong definition... because they are your organization's issues." (Practical Sustainability, p. 99)

Define Your Terms

Hazardous Waste

“Start with hazardous waste... because a good, existing definition is already accessible in most states and countries.” (Practical Sustainability, p. 106)

Hazardous materials are typically regulated by government agencies and include things like corrosive chemicals, solvents, or flammable substances.

Example Definition:

Hazardous waste includes any material designated by state or federal law as dangerous to human health or the environment. This includes items like spent solvents, acids, flammable materials, and regulated industrial by-products.

Look to your local or national regulatory agency (e.g., EPA or state DEQ) for the legal definitions of hazardous and universal waste.

Resource:

EPA Hazardous Waste Regulations

Write your definition of hazardous waste:

Solid Waste

Solid waste is trickier than it seems. Landfilled and incinerated materials are clearly waste — but what about recycled materials or beneficial reuse (like sawdust at landfills)?

“Some organizations define recycling as part of their solid waste... others don’t.” (Practical Sustainability, p. 100)

Example Definition:

Solid waste includes all non-hazardous materials discarded by the organization, including recyclable items, unless specifically diverted through a certified recycling program.

Write your definition of solid waste:

Energy Use

Define the sources and boundaries of energy use your organization will track — and which forms you consider sustainable.

"Most organizations consider only electricity and natural gas... but what about landfill gas or solar?" (Practical Sustainability, p. 103)

Example Definition:

Energy use includes all purchased electricity and fuels used for facility operations, including heating, cooling, and machinery. Sustainable energy includes solar, wind, and landfill gas, while grid electricity is considered neutral.

Write your definition of energy use:

Reduction

You need a definition before you can track or claim progress.

Example Definition:

A reduction is a quantifiable decrease in resource use or emissions over time, measured against a defined baseline year or period.

Write your definition of reduction:

Water Use

You can focus on process water, general use, or even water quality after treatment.

"Some define water use by process type; others by what goes out of the building." (Practical Sustainability, p. 104)

Example Definition:

Water use includes all freshwater used in production, cooling, cleaning, restrooms, and landscaping, as measured by utility meters or calculated estimates.

Write your definition of water use:

Stormwater

Stormwater is often ignored until legally required, but it can be a major source of environmental impact.

"Even without a permit, organizations should define how their runoff is managed." (Practical Sustainability, p. 105)

Example Definition:

Stormwater includes all precipitation runoff from the organization's property, including parking lots, loading docks, rooftops, and landscaped areas. The goal is to reduce pollutants and slow the discharge to nearby water.

Write your definition of stormwater:

Fuel

This can be part of energy use or carbon footprint, but it helps to define it separately first.

"Fuel is used by vehicles, mowers, commuting employees — even contractors." (Practical Sustainability, p. 105)

Example Definition:

Fuel use includes gasoline, diesel, propane, and other combustibles consumed for transportation, on-site operations, or equipment. Biofuels are tracked separately as renewable fuels.

Write your definition of fuel:

Carbon Footprint

Keep it simple and start with direct emissions.

"All roads lead to carbon emissions… Use EPA tools for Scope 1–3 emissions." (Practical Sustainability, p. 107)

Example Definition:

Carbon footprint includes Scope 1 (on-site combustion), Scope 2 (purchased electricity), and tracked Scope 3 emissions (employee commuting, shipping, etc.) using EPA's GHG tools.

Resources

- EPA GHG Emissions Tools
- EPA Simplified Emissions Calculator

Write your definition of carbon footprint:

Success

Without a clear definition, you'll never know if you're "done" or making progress.

"Your definition of success becomes a driving force… know when to celebrate." (Practical Sustainability, p. 109)

Example Definition:

Success is achieving a 25% reduction in landfill-bound solid waste, reaching 50% recycling participation among staff, and lowering utility water usage by 15% within 2 years.

Write your definition of success:

Final Reminders from Practical Sustainability

- **Document your definitions** and make them easy to share internally.
- **Keep it simple.** Complexity kills momentum.
- **Use your team's language** — you are the authority on your own sustainability journey.
- **Be prepared to defend your definitions** with logic, clarity, and measurable impact.
