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6 Easy Steps to Turbo Boost Climate Action in Local Government

While nations deliberate on national and international policy related to climate change, local governments worldwide are faced with the daunting challenge of addressing the localized implications of climate change on their communities and operations. Ultimately, climate change poses an unparalleled volume and diversity of challenges for any organization, much less local governments who frequently do not (or may not think they) have sufficient resources to successfully address these considerations.

Let's think about this as a maturity model. First you come to accept that you have a problem. Once you've done so, a public administrator or elected leader will task someone to be responsible for addressing the issue. In this case, an environmental professional, sustainability director or resilience officer may have been hired or designated from existing staff. This is a great start, but even in the best of circumstances, a few people here and there trying to address the scope of implications facing that community is truly insufficient. I would compare this to mice trying to move a battleship.

Just think how difficult it is to change procurement guidelines, zoning and building codes, incorporate climate change into master planning efforts, engage the community, and develop innovative financing strategies, to name a few tasks.

So you've developed a nice core group within local government that has really begun to move the needle on climate action. Now what? Here are a few practical, incredibly effective steps you should be taking to turbo boost climate action:

1. **Building Awareness** – Climate change is changing the way we deliver local government services. Every employee needs to at least have an awareness of what climate change is and how it's going to affect the community. In the case of the City of Fort Lauderdale, the City worked with the [CLEO Institute](#) to develop a 2-hour session that every city employee was required to attend over a span of a few months. Yes, even the maintenance field crews were included. Why? Because you need to open your staff's eyes to a dynamically changing world around them, foster the culture of change in your organization, engage every employee so that they will self-activate and become part of the solution, establish ambassadors at every turn and build public will.
2. **Training for Decision Makers** – The name of the game here is making sure that your management understands that climate change is a critical imperative so that you can get them to become constructive assets to your climate action planning. Rome wasn't built in a day, but it also wasn't built by one person. You're going to need your senior leaders in civil works, natural resources, parks and recreation, emergency management, transportation, fleet management, civil engineering and other key roles to be assets. They need to experience that moment when they realize climate change is affecting their job. They also need the tools to modernize their profession. There are a plethora of free and/or very reasonably priced options available. You'll be able to find courses that are taught by your local universities, the NOAA Climate Office and through ACCO's [Climate Fundamentals Academies](#) (we'll even help you build the capacity to administer and teach these on your own). You can find online resources as well. Be sure to select courses that are at least downscaled to your region so that attendees are learning about specific implications that affect their jobs and their homes – when they see that their neighborhood is in a flood zone and projections for what that means with a foot of sea level rise, you'll get their attention. In many instances, these professionals will also be able to leverage such training to satisfy continuing education requirements that they need to address for their own professional credentials.
3. **Customized Training for Key Leaders and Professionals** – At some point, you need to move from awareness to building specific competencies and skills based upon a particular need. What you want an infrastructure professional to be able to do and know is very different than what you might want a supply chain professional to know. So once you have covered foundational training that addresses the masses, look at options to access or develop training specific to their professional functions. ACCO is developing these sorts of courses, but credentialing bodies such as the [American Institute of Architects](#), [American Society of Civil Engineers](#) and [American Planning Association](#) will answer the charge if they hear from

employers that these skills are needed. Again, these professionals will also be able to leverage such training to satisfy continuing education requirements that they need to address for their professional credentials.

4. **Updating Job Descriptions** – Your head of civil works has just retired and you’re looking to replace that person. Before you do, take a look at the job description and requirements and see what you can do to ensure that you are getting applicants who have better skills suited for this transformation. The more you incorporate climate-related competencies into job descriptions, the better your pool of candidates will be – and perhaps most importantly, when credentialing bodies and universities see this change in job requirements, they will update their curriculum requirements. In the long run, taking this critical step will ensure that it becomes integrated throughout your workforce. If you’re not sure what [skills and competencies](#) to include in a job description, reach out to the corresponding credentialing body to ask them what they’re hearing about the nexus of climate change and their credential. If that doesn’t work, come to ACCO and we’ll help you work through that process.
5. **Updating RFPs, Procurements & Contracts** – Make sure that you engage service providers, vendors and consultants that understand your climate risks. Procure goods and services from those that can help you achieve your mitigation, adaptation and resilience goals. Every dollar that you put out to purchase goods and services or build and maintain infrastructure is a dollar that should be wisely spent. If you’re purchasing a good that is sourced from a water-intensive vendor or region while you’ve declared a water-reduction goal for the city hardly seems sensible. Of course, neither is investing millions of dollars in an infrastructure project that doesn’t account for foreseeable risks posed by climate change. This is a risk management conversation. While the risks that any specific impact of climate change may seem low in probability, if the magnitude of the realization of that risk is costly or intolerable, then you have a business case for accounting for this today.
6. **Engage the Community** – You’ve just accomplished a fantastic project building a levee to reduce flood risk. Congratulations. The problem is that the average person walking by has no idea what was done. If you want to build public will, you need to engage them regularly, and even need to get creative with generating buzz and awareness. The City of Miami Beach is raising roads in the Sunset Harbor area of the island by 2.5 feet. They’ve branded the effort “Flooding Solutions” and even created a hashtag, [#MBRisingAbove](#), and a web site at www.MBRisingAbove.com. Public support is needed for this type of expensive investment in adaptation to reduce risk. Showcase your efforts. And remember that we all have short memories: that flood that washed away a road 3 years ago is a distant memory to most. Engaging the community on these concerns will help to ensure that these issues are a primary dialogue in mayoral elections—just ask Miami Beach Mayor Phillip Levine, whose campaign focused intensively on the city’s flood problems related to sea level rise and stormwater management.

Changing culture and building public will isn’t rocket science, but it takes concerted, strategic effort. Everything is by design. Create the structure, find the right people, give them the tools they need and you have reinvented local government. Put a game plan together that exponentially increases the number of assets you have in this battle. Think about what assets you need, where you need them, and go make that happen. It’s amazing what you can accomplish in just a few years using these basic steps.

About ACCO

The Association of Climate Change Officers is a 501(c)(3) non-profit membership organization for executives and officials worldwide in industry, government, academia and the non-profit community. ACCO’s mission is to define, develop and support the functions, resources and communities necessary for effective organizational leadership in addressing climate-related risks and opportunities. For more information about ACCO, please visit www.ACCOonline.org.

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