Introduction
This case story from Ashridge Business School describes a research project that explored the lessons that can be learnt from how sustainability is being integrated into in-house company leadership development programmes.

Challenges
PRME has been established in recognition of the important role of management education in shifting mindsets and enabling action to achieve sustainability goals. One of the central areas of focus for the PRME network has been curriculum change in business schools, but management education also happens in-house within companies, and often with business schools acting as partners through customised executive education. The primary goal of this research project was understanding the extent to which ‘curriculum change’ is already happening in in-house leadership development and executive education, and what the PRME community and business school world might learn from this.

Actions taken
A research project was designed, which engaged with seven companies (BM, Sky, IMC Pan Asia Alliance, Ernst & Young, Lend Lease, HSBC, and Interface) that had taken steps to integrate sustainability into their in-house leadership development activities. Researchers worked in close partnership with the companies, conducting interviews with project sponsors within each of the seven companies, as well as with their external learning partners (if they had them), and between five and ten participants in the learning programmes. Researchers explored questions including:

- Why were these organisations choosing to do this?
- What were they hoping to achieve?
- How did the idea of doing this turn into reality?
- What kinds of approaches were these organisations taking?
- What are they achieving already?
- What are they learning about what works and what doesn’t?

Results
The experience of the seven companies suggests the following:

1. A growing numbers of companies are not only recognising that they require new ways of leading and therefore new kinds of leadership capability, but are also investing substantial resources to try to respond. They are specifically citing the business need to:

- Develop leaders’ ‘worldview’ and perspective on how the world works, and develop leaders’ understanding of key economic, political, cultural, and environmental issues and trends and their business implications

Author: Matthew Gitsham
Exploring how sustainability is being integrated into in-house company leadership development programmes

- Give leaders direct personal experiences of these issues and trends, and develop participants’ empathy for, and first hand relationships with, diverse organisational stakeholders
- Develop leaders’ understanding of their organisation’s current strategy and activities in response to these issues and trends, as well as implications for their own role within the business
- Encourage leaders to more explicitly understand their own beliefs and values, and to develop a personal vision for their own position on what they want to stand for and their own roadmap for how to act accordingly
- Build commitment among leaders for the need for change
- Develop leaders’ skill to lead change within the organisation, within the industry sector, and within wider society, including developing the skill to engage in public debate

2. One of the key aspects of how they are trying to achieve this is to integrate this additional focus on it into existing leadership development programmes or develop new leadership programmes specifically to meet this need. Although each of the companies developed approaches in isolation from each other, there are common themes among their informing ideas regarding how best to approach developing this kind of leadership capability. Most approaches included some combination of general classroom-based awareness raising with a mixture of experiential learning, stakeholder engagement, and business-specific project-based learning focused on their own organisation. Most chose to work with external learning partners, but only one of the seven worked with a business school; the others all worked with specialist consultancies or NGOs.

3. The evidence suggests that these kinds of interventions are reasonably successful in creating certain outcomes, particularly in stimulating both a number of impacts in terms of leaders’ understanding, perspective and intent, and a number of new activities leaders had pursued as a result. Although our research was qualitative, not quantitative, it was clear that the following kinds of outcomes were being achieved by a good proportion of the people participating:

**Understanding, perspective, and intent**

- Greater familiarity with a range of global ‘sustainability’ trends and issues and their business relevance
- A different perspective on the role of business organisations in responding to these issues and trends
- A greater sense of empathy and personal connection with diverse stakeholder groups
- A greater understanding of their organisation’s existing strategy and activities in this area
- A greater commitment and strengthened intent to become involved and support these activities

**New activities**

- Specific projects within the organisation
- Seeking out a new role or enhanced responsibilities
- Becoming a more vocal advocate of sustainability in the workplace
- A range of activities in their personal lives outside of the workplace
4. Key aspects of the learning experiences that contributed to the outcomes achieved, from the point of view of participants, include:

- The experiential nature of the learning – made dry abstract ideas come alive and be more viscerally understood, and made the need to personally and organisationally act differently more strongly felt
- The opportunity to personally engage with diverse individuals and speak directly from that experience – enhanced their ability to be an influential change agent
- Business-focused project-based learning – enabled participants to explore and make sense of the business relevance of the experiential engagement
- The extent of senior management direct engagement in the programme – signified that top management thought the key messages were important.

5. Crucially though, a number of key variables in the wider organisational context were as important, if not more important, in securing outcomes than the design and facilitation of the learning programme itself. These include:

- The extent to which senior managers, line managers, and the wider organisational culture were generally supportive of the objectives of the learning programme
- The amount of time or resources that participants were able to bring to bear to act on new thinking gained from the experience
- The extent to which participants in the programme were subsequently able to take on a new or enhanced job role within the organisation
- The extent to which participants remained connected with other participants
- The extent to which participants felt supported, encouraged, recognised, and rewarded by the organisation for the efforts they took to act on their learning from the experience

The role of PRME/sustainability principles

- The goals of the PRME initiative and discussions at PRME meetings were an important stimulus to generating the research idea and instigating the research project.
- It is anticipated that the PRME community will give valuable feedback on this research, which will be useful in enhancing future research in this area.