

# Towards Greener Health care: Using consultation and research to strengthen a grassroots employee sustainability program

Scholar: Evan Hammer

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## Project Background:

Integrating sustainable practices into health care is a complex process, due in part to the fast-paced nature of health care, the limited of resources available to devote to issues seen as “outside patient care” and biomedical cross-contamination in recycling. The four main health organizations around the Metropolitan Vancouver area, grouped together as the Lower Mainland Health Organizations, are at the forefront of sustainable practices in the healthcare sector. The health organizations that make up this consortium are Fraser Health Authority, Providence Health Care, Provincial Health Services Authority and Vancouver Coastal Health. These organizations have a series of targets to reduce waste, increase recycling, and lower greenhouse gas emissions, among other metrics.

A team operates across all four of the health organizations, called GreenCare, and focuses on issues relating to energy, environment and sustainability including recycling and composting. In an effort to create a culture shift toward more environmental responsibility, the GreenCare team created the Green+Leaders program. Modeled after UBC’s Green Office teams, Green+Leaders start and maintain waste reduction initiatives, encourage sustainable behaviour, and engage colleagues around sustainability topics. Already in its seventh year, the program has seen many successes, and boasts over 250 active Green+Leaders.

As with any program, the Green+Leaders program needs to adapt to changing circumstances to stay fresh and relevant. The program began a process of refresh in early 2016, to improve and bolster program elements. Green+Leaders identified areas for improvement, including keeping experienced leaders engaged and looking at more systemic changes including culture change.

My role, as a Sustainability Scholar, was to assist the program manager in devising options for the program evolution. My work consisted of three parts: research best practices,

implement a consultation strategy, and pull all the information together for a final report out to the program manager and the GreenCare team.

## Methods for undertaking work:

My time was split between doing background research, implementing an engagement strategy and analyzing and summarizing the results.

### **Research:**

For the research in general, I used two different approaches. One was a review of the available academic research, and the other a search of “grey” and popular research. I also conducted several interviews with other organizations doing similar activities

In previous engagement sessions, Green+Leaders identified a mentor element as a possible addition to the program, and the program manager was keen to explore this option. I spent the bulk my research time looking at methods to design and implement a mentor program.

#### Key learnings from this include:

- A mentor program can have positive impacts for the mentor/ mentee and the organization including increased retention and loyalty
- Programs come in all shapes and sizes including traditional, peer-to-peer, group and reverse mentoring
- The type of program should be tailored to the needs and goals of the organization
- A mentor program should be well-planned out, have buy-in across the organization, clear objectives and metrics and the appropriate level of time and resources

I also did research on sustainability programs, culture change and green funds.

#### Some key learnings:

- Engaging participants in a meaningful way can strengthen their ownership over the program and create lasting change
- Some programs involved participants in a high level including making decisions about the direction of the program, training and recruitment
- Getting high level buy-in as well as broad support across the organization is key to creating a culture shift
- Green funds can help participants feel empowered, inspire creativity and create grassroots movements

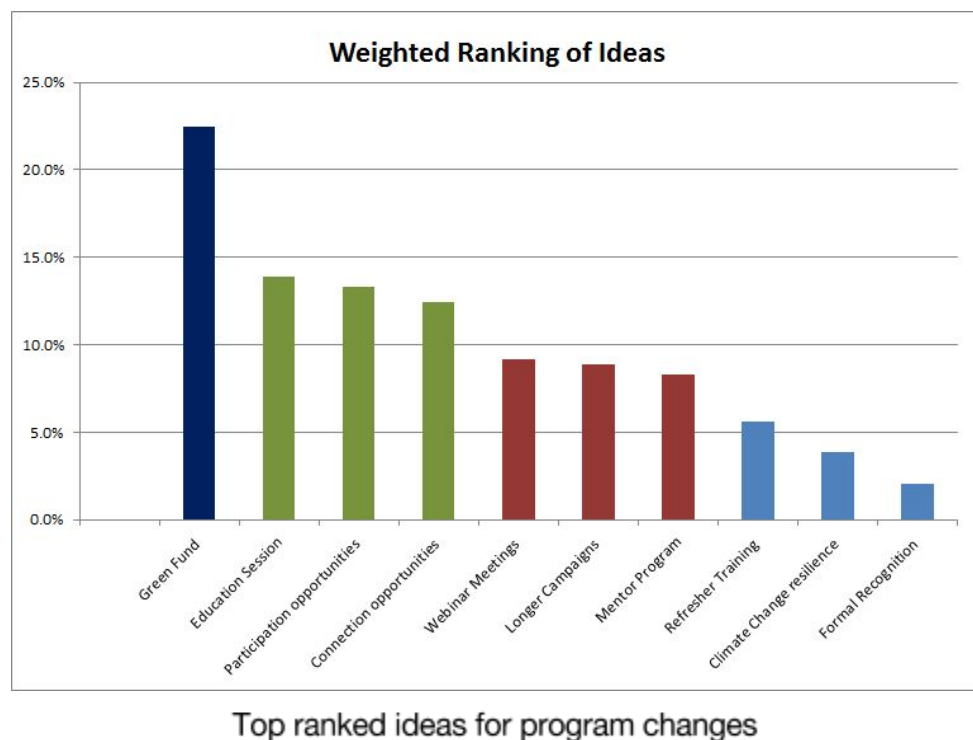
## Consultation

In order to gather opinions from participants and others connected to the Green+Leaders program, the program manager and I designed and distributed two surveys, and conducted five focus groups.

### Green+Leader Survey

We designed a survey to gauge Green+Leaders engagement levels, and get feedback on some proposed changes to the program. In order to limit survey fatigue, we combined this refresh survey with the annual Green+Leaders program survey. The survey asked about participant's engagement level, what was most challenging and most fulfilling, and feedback and ideas on possible program changes.

We got a strong response to the survey, with seventy-five Green+Leaders taking part in the survey. Respondents were asked to rate ten different ideas for the program evolution. All the ideas did well, but several in particular were very well-received, most notably a Green Fund, which was by far the best ranked of all the ideas, and featured in the top three across the health authorities.



Green+Leaders also identified some strengths and challenges of the program. “Enabling change” and being part of a “green community” were the most frequently identified strengths. For challenges, “time constraints,” “feeling isolated” and not feeling supported were the most commonly cited reply. Interestingly, the idea of community was named as

both a strength and a weakness. Community is clearly highly valued among the Green+Leaders, seen as a strength when present, and a weakness when lacking.

### Manager Survey

Managers of Green+Leaders are a key component to the program. While managers need to sign off when one of their staff becomes a Green+Leader, there is opportunity to increase contact and relationships with managers. In an effort to open up more dialogue with managers, and get manager feedback on the program, we designed a short survey for managers, asking about their perception of the program, especially around program strengths and weaknesses.

We received a robust response from managers to the survey, with forty-five managers taking part. The survey was definitely a win for engagement, as half of the managers who took part in the survey were agreeable to follow-up conversations. The top two picks for the program's greatest strength were environmental awareness and enabling change. This illustrates that the program's goal - creating change around sustainability issues - is recognized as a strength by managers. On the other side, managers noted that support, both from the organization and co-workers, was a challenge, along with the visibility of the program. Along these lines, some of the manager's identified that they had little knowledge of the program. This ties in with the lack of support identified by Green+Leaders. The managers' survey shows that some of this deficiency in support may be because they don't have a full understanding about the program itself, because of manager turnover, staff changing locations, and so on. This creates an opportunity to engage with



Graphic Illustration of program strengths, challenges and opportunities from focus group participants. Drawn by Aaron Lao

managers, strengthen relationships and bolster understanding and support of the program.

### Focus Groups

In an effort to get more face-to-face feedback, and allow opportunities for group creativity, we designed and conducted five focus groups, two in person, and three online. The focus groups were well-attended. There were three questions for discussion: the inspiration for Green+Leaders, confronting challenges and increasing cohesion, and a big dream for the program.

The focus groups generated energy and ideas for the program, especially the larger, in-person session. The Green+Leaders are clearly passionate about the program and sustainability, and there is appetite among them to participate more in initiatives.

### Key Learnings

While categorizing the focus group responses, and the open-ended responses from both surveys, two spheres of influence became apparent. First there was the program itself, where changes could be made without too much trouble, such as implementing a Green Fund. The second area was organizational. Some possible changes were outside the scope of the program itself per se, and would need a shift within the organizational culture in order to be realized.

The overarching goal of both the Green+Leaders program, and the GreenCare team in which it's nestled, is to create a culture of sustainability. This is not an ideal that is held by the GreenCare team alone. These sustainability goals are part of the overarching policies of the four Lower Mainland Health Organizations, and have support from the executive level. However, work still needs to be done for these policies to be common practices among the various departments and organizations.

## Observations & Recommendations

The Green+Leaders program is essential and effective for moving the four Lower Mainland Health Organizations toward their sustainability and environmental goals. While there are some challenges to the program, overall the program is robust. The program manager is well-liked by participants and has an extensive array of experience needed to oversee the program.

In order to expand the sphere of influence for the program, several adjustments could be made to the program. Namely, increasing organizational support and creating a greater degree of ownership among Green+Leaders.

Throughout the consultation process, a number of ideas were suggested by participants or floated for feedback. Implementing all the ideas and continuing to oversee them is an intensive process. Despite her impressive array of skills, the program manager is only one person, and can only take on so much more to her already busy portfolio. The program manager has already laid out changes to the program based on our work together, including planning for a green fund and a mentor program. The mentor program is planned to be more of a peer-to-peer group style, which will help Green+Leaders support each other. These changes will strengthen the program and help the Green+Leaders feel more connected.

With an eye toward expanding the program's reach and influence, I would recommend a shift toward more independence among Green+Leaders. For example, one participant suggested giving participants more autonomy over their specific site. During my research, I found programs that involved participants in various levels of the program, including recruitment and program planning. While this degree of involvement may not directly work for the Green+Leaders program, due to time constraints, etc, shifting some of the responsibility from the program manager to participants would be beneficial. Participants would gain a deeper degree of ownership, and would become more invested in the program. As well, this would allow for more expansion of the program, as the program manager would be less involved in some of the program elements such as support. This shift is already underway, with the mentoring program incorporating an element of peer support.

This could allow the program manager some leeway to get involved with the second aspect of strengthening the program: forging more connections and relationships across the four organizations. Given the program manager's skill set, the manager is well-positioned to increase buy-in of the program through interpersonal connections.

In the short and medium term, the program manager has laid out a substantive series of changes to the program. These are well-thought out and shift the program in the right direction. Looking toward the bigger vision of both Green+Leaders, the Greencare team and the health organizations, I believe that a dual purpose strategy of giving more responsibility to Green+Leaders while creating more relationships and connections across the organization is key.

## About the Scholar



Evan Hammer

2016 Sustainability Scholar

Master of Arts in Planning  
Candidate, 2016

School of Community and  
Regional Planning