



Setting a Strategy for Sports Organizations: A Resource Guide

A PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABILITY AND SUCCESS



At 3R, we help sports and events organizations realize the business value of sustainability. Our team has practical experience in advising teams across NFL, NBA, MLB, MLS, F1, IndyCar, and NASCAR.


MORE ABOUT 3R SUSTAINABILITY

3R is a full-service sustainability solutions company that works with organizations to integrate sustainability into their business operations, helping them realize the value of sustainability. With a focus on partnership, our team provides expert support to educate and engage your company throughout the process.

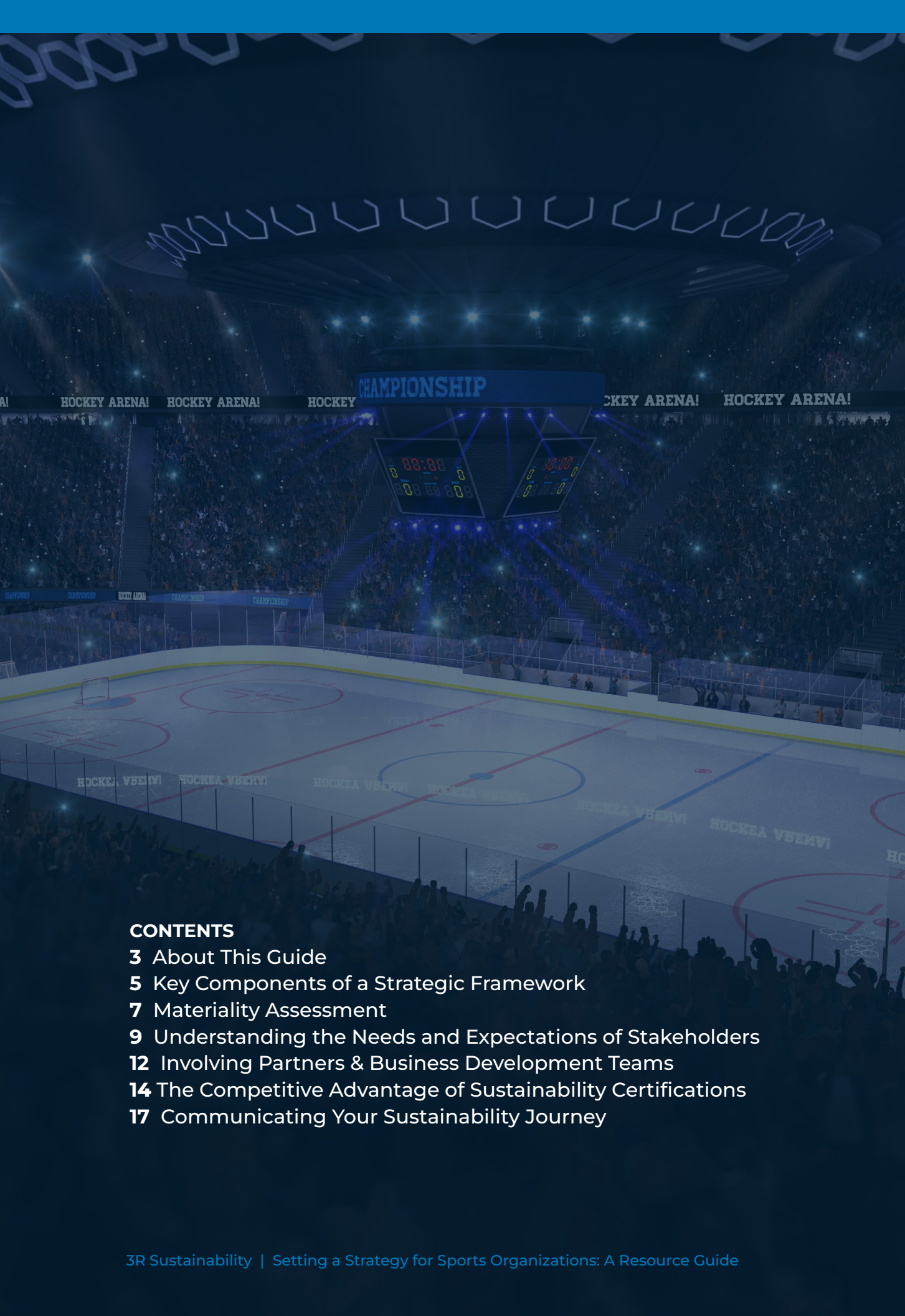
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VALUE**



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About This Guide

This guide serves as a resource for organizations striving to implement a sustainability strategy. It begins by outlining the key components of a strategic framework, including understanding your organization, context, and the issues relevant to your mission and vision. By understanding and integrating these core elements, organizations can align their activities with sustainability principles, ensuring that every action taken contributes to broader environmental, social, and economic goals. The guide emphasizes the importance of a materiality assessment to identify the most relevant sustainability issues for an organization to consider. It also expands on the critical involvement of partners and business development teams, which are essential for fostering collaboration and driving progress.

With stakeholders being an important part of an organization’s strategy, this guide provides insights into understanding the needs and expectations of stakeholders and how to best identify, engage, and collaborate with key stakeholders. This also helps readers to understand the competitive advantage of sustainable event management systems, certifications and effective communication of an organization’s sustainability journey.

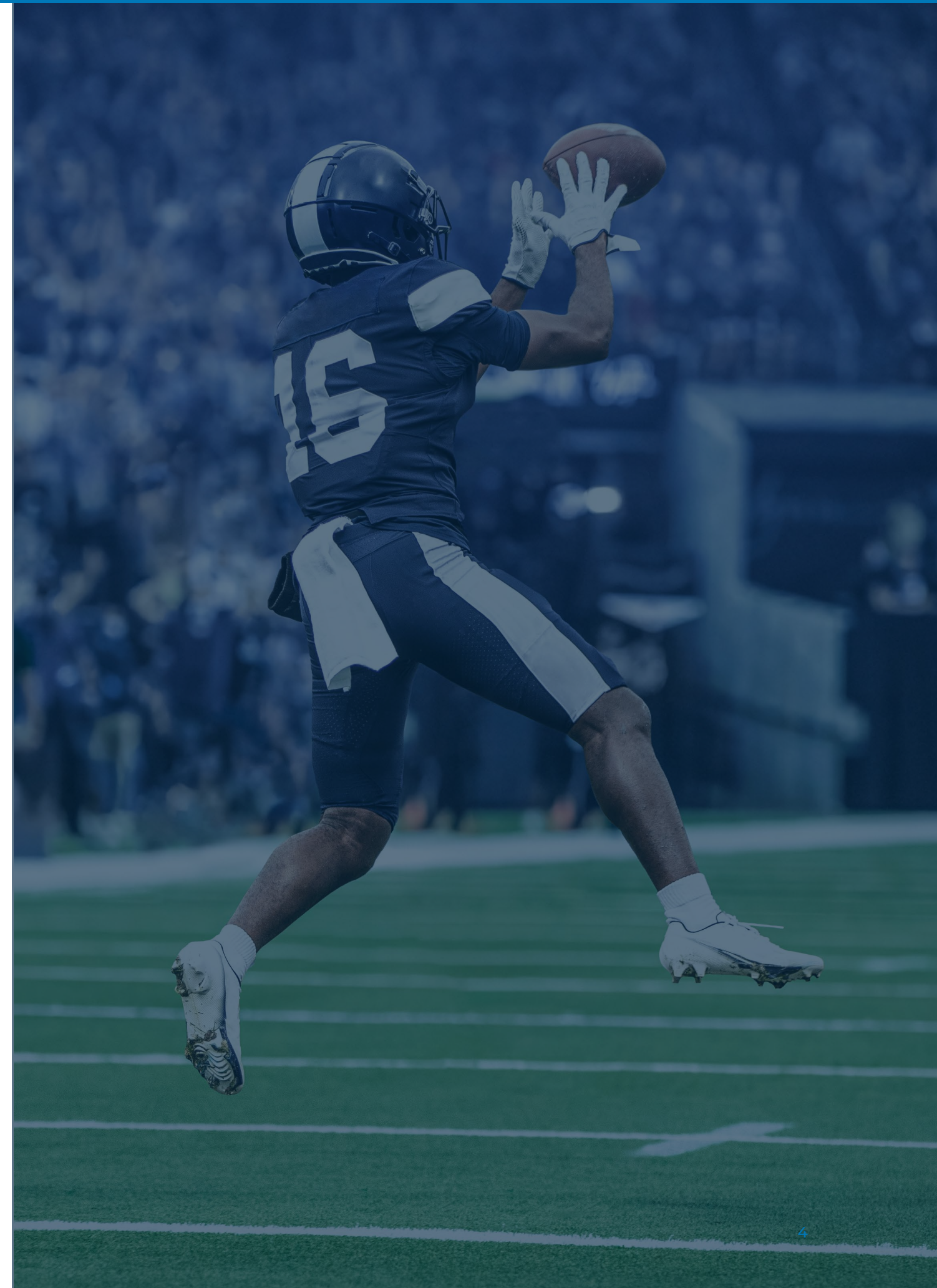
By following the steps detailed in this guide, organizations can systematically review their mission, vision, and values, identifying opportunities to embed sustainability at the core of their operations. This approach not only enhances stakeholder relationships but also drives long-term business success, creating value for employees, fans, corporate partners, and the wider community. The guide is a valuable tool for any organization looking to make a meaningful impact through sustainable practices and is not intended to be a comprehensive sustainability strategy framework. Instead, it offers a deeper exploration of selected components that are often under-addressed in high-level resources. It is designed to complement broader strategy efforts by providing practical tools and insights for implementation.

Understanding the Need for Strategic Planning

In the dynamic and competitive world of sports, the importance of creating a robust strategy cannot be overstated. Sports organizations—whether they oversee professional teams, amateur leagues, or international federations—must navigate a landscape marked by shifting economic trends, evolving fan expectations, technological innovation, and increased scrutiny around sustainability and ethics. Setting a strategy is not merely a business exercise; it is a cornerstone for ensuring the organization’s growth, relevance, and long-term impact.

Strategic planning serves as the blueprint for a sports organization’s ambitions, allowing it to align its resources, objectives, and operations toward a common goal. Without a clear strategy, organizations risk stagnation, inefficiency, and missed opportunities. Strategic planning enables organizations to:

- **Adapt to changing environments:** The sports industry is influenced by trends such as digital transformation, fan engagement through social media, and global shifts in sports consumption. A strategy ensures organizations can respond proactively.
- **Optimize resource allocation:** From budgetary constraints to continual improvement associated with objectives, sports organizations often operate under limited resources. A strategy helps prioritize investments and maximize impact.
- **Enhance stakeholder relationships:** Sponsors, partners, athletes, fans, and communities all play a crucial role in an organization’s ecosystem. A strategy helps you understand the needs and expectations of your interested parties, allowing you to strengthen collaboration and build trust among these groups.



Key Components of a Strategic Framework: Understanding the Context Associated with Your Organizational Mission and Vision

The first step in building a sustainability strategy is to understand your organization’s vision and mission—what you stand for, where you’re headed, and the values that guide your work. From there, the goal is to align sustainability with these foundational statements to support your organization’s broader purpose.

A vision defines the long-term aspirations of the organization—where it sees itself in the future. Meanwhile, the mission outlines its purpose and values it stands for. An organizational vision and mission serve as a guiding "north star," influencing decision-making, resource allocation, and overall strategy. Integrating sustainability into this mission transforms it from a standalone initiative to a fundamental element that drives organizational behavior, strategy, and operations.

Research consistently shows that companies with a well-integrated sustainability approach [experience significant benefits](#), such as enhanced financial performance, improved stakeholder trust, and better risk management. Understanding your organization and its context allows you to identify the issues relevant to you and what social, economic, and environmental impacts come into play. With the organizational context in mind, aligning your mission with sustainability can create value for your interested parties (e.g. employees, fans, corporate partners, etc.), their communities, and the planet, while also driving long-term business success.

Key steps to effectively embed sustainability within your organization’s mission

1. Review Organizational Mission, Vision, and Values and Identify Opportunities for Alignment

Start by evaluating your organization's mission, vision, values, and strategic objectives. Ask key questions like:

- Does the mission reflect your organization's commitment to sustainability?
- Are there opportunities to embed sustainability principles such as environmental responsibility, social equity, and economic resilience?
- How do our events and operations impact the environment and society?
- What role can we play in driving positive change through sport?
- What values must guide our decision-making processes?

Identify and evaluate any issues and gaps where sustainability could be incorporated. For example, if your organization’s mission includes promoting community engagement, this can be enhanced by incorporating social sustainability elements like inclusivity, accessibility, or supporting workforce development (i.e., green jobs). If operational excellence is a key focus, then embedding energy efficiency and waste reduction can contribute to reaching those goals.

EXAMPLES

- The [Climate Pledge Arena in Seattle](#) is powered entirely by renewable energy for its day-to-day operations.
- The NBA has expanded its long-standing community engagement program, NBA Cares, to [incorporate environmental sustainability through the NBA Green initiative](#). This initiative has already reduced team aviation miles by 50,000, cut plastic bottle use by 80% in its offices, and engaged 100% of teams in the NBA Arena Sustainability Task Force.

2. Engage Leadership and Key Stakeholders

After reviewing the mission and vision to identify sustainability opportunities, it is important to align leadership and key stakeholders with organizational goals.

- **Engage Leadership:** Engage senior leaders to champion sustainability to align it with strategic objectives and secure resources.
- **Engage Key Interested Parties:** Identify the key interested parties – employees, customers, partners, sponsors, attendees, suppliers, and the community – assess their interests, and involve them in shaping a collaborative, impactful approach.

3. Create a Sustainability Vision Statement

Craft a sustainability vision that aligns with the company’s mission. This statement should:

- Be clear and compelling, outlining the organization’s commitment to sustainable practices;
- Address the needs of key stakeholders such as fans, employees, and sponsors; and
- Provide strategic direction for embedding sustainability throughout the organization, helping guide day-to-day decision-making and long-term planning.

EXAMPLES

The International Olympic Committee (IOC): The [IOC's vision](#) is to "build a better world through sport," with a goal to "minimize our footprint and maximize our positive impact across social, environmental, and economic spheres." For each event, the IOC further refines its vision. For example, [the vision for the 2030 French Alps Games](#) is to "unite the northern and southern French Alps, transforming the region into a hub for winter sport, while delivering maximum social and economic benefits to a broad geographic area." This vision emphasizes sustainable tourism and addresses future challenges, such as the impact of climate change on winter sports.

World Athletics: World Athletics has [set a sustainability vision](#) “to become the leading International Sports Federation in delivering best-in-class sustainable events”. This vision guides their strategy to embed sustainability throughout the entire event lifecycle, from permitting and planning to execution, ensuring that sustainability is a key element in all World Athletics events.



4. Monitor, Measure and Communicate Progress

Establish systems to monitor, measure, and evaluate sustainability performance. Use data reporting mechanisms such as sustainability scorecards or [dashboards](#) to track key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with the company’s mission and goals. Analyzing performance against your sustainability principles, purpose, and values can help organizations stay on track with their sustainability objectives and targets.

Regular communication of progress—both internally and externally—builds trust and maintains momentum, showcasing the company’s commitment to its sustainability mission. This process can be enabled by using the [Green Sports Alliance’s \(GSA\) Play to Zero Tool](#), Arc, or another a tool to track performance data. Play to Zero Partners of the Green Sports Alliance offer specialized capabilities in data collection, dashboarding, and reporting, ensuring that organizations effectively track and report their sustainability efforts in alignment with global standards.

3R Sustainability: [Unlocking Sustainability Insights with Data Dashboards](#)

5. Continuous Improvement and Feedback Loops

Sustainability is an ongoing process of learning and refinement. Organizations should continuously assess the suitability and effectiveness of their sustainability initiatives, incorporate feedback from management reviews and interested parties, and adjust strategies to maximize impact. This iterative approach ensures that sustainability drives business performance and value and remains a dynamic, evolving priority embedded throughout the organization.

Materiality Assessment

Once your mission and vision have been aligned with sustainability, the next step is identifying which sustainability topics are most relevant to your operations and stakeholders. A materiality assessment provides the foundation for prioritizing these efforts.

What is a Double Materiality Assessment and How Does it Relate to Sustainable Business?

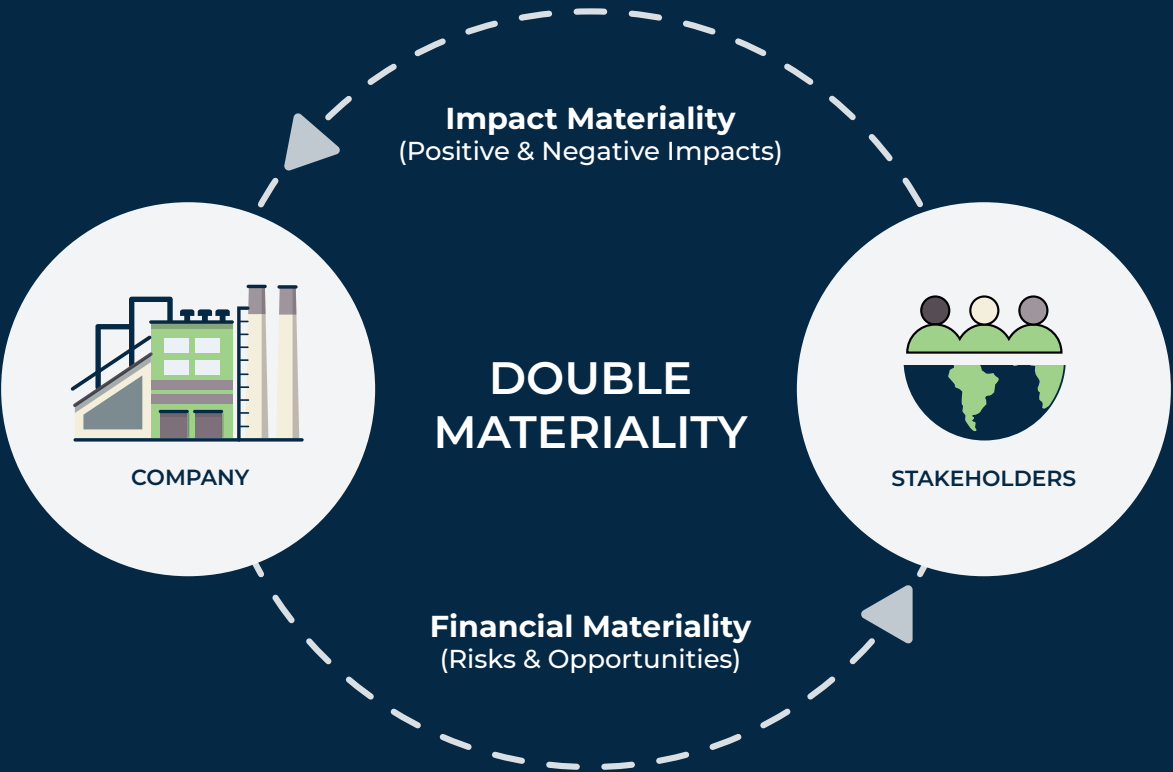
By conducting a double materiality assessment, an organization identifies and prioritizes the most relevant sustainability-related topics that could impact operations and performance in the long-term. Integrating management of material topics into overall business strategy and planning drives added value and promotes consistency across operations.

Sustainability is a broad term that includes a range of topics in different environmental, social, and governance aspects. Double materiality refers to both **impact** and **financial** materiality; it is a concept that is required for certain sustainability reporting standards, including the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS). This approach considers the sustainability impacts, risks, and opportunities (IROs) of a company’s strategies, operations and value chain.

A double materiality assessment is a tool that allows an organization to strategically identify topics that are material, or relevant, to their operations and interested parties. This allows the organization to prioritize these topics for goal setting, strategizing, reporting, and progress tracking. Additionally, identifying material topics provides insight into areas that pose risks, opportunities, and impacts to the organization and the needs and expectations of interested parties. Having this insight aids in tailoring an effective sustainable management system to strengthen organizational resilience and provides the basis for sustainability reporting to demonstrate transparency.

UNDERSTANDING IRO TERMINOLOGY

- Impact:** The effect a business (including its value chain) has or could have on the environment or society and people
- Risk:** Sustainability-related risks with negative financial effects on business matters
- Opportunity:** Sustainability-related opportunities with positive financial effects



IMPACT MATERIALITY
The ‘inside-out’ perspective
How do business operations/
value chain impact the
environment and society?



FINANCIAL MATERIALITY
The ‘outside-in’ perspective
How could external
sustainability factors affect
business financial positions
and prospects?

CONSIDERATIONS OF DOUBLE MATERIALITY

- Positive & Negative
- Actual & Potential
- Short-term & Long-term
- Intended & Unintended



Strategic Benefits of a Double Materiality Assessment

Enhanced stakeholder trust, transparency, and alignment with expectations

A critical part of conducting a double materiality assessment includes engaging key stakeholders to understand their insights, challenges, expectations, and highest priorities. By engaging various stakeholder groups, such as employees, community groups, key partners, suppliers, regulators, etc., an organization gains key insights that assist in strengthening relationships, building trust, and aligning with expectations and potential regulatory requirements. If an organization has an Enterprise Risk Manager (often within the Legal or Finance department), they will have great input to the double materiality assessment to help identify the biggest risks and impacts.

Improved strategic planning with an integrated management system approach

Determining material topics enables the organization to begin embedding sustainability-related priorities into its overall strategic planning. To advance progress within the defined material topics, organizations can set concrete goals and key performance indicators (KPIs) to achieve a clear direction for the company based on its highest priorities. Adopting goals and KPIs means that organizations can track their progress and understand where they are improving and potentially falling short. In addition to understanding priorities, studies show that addressing industry-relevant sustainability factors can provide a long-term performance advantage¹. Proactively integrating these topics and goal setting into strategic planning allows for effective allocation of resources and planning, enabling the organization to align its sustainability goals with long-term objectives and improve the decision-making process.

Improved risk management approach and strategy

By conducting a double materiality assessment, an organization gains insight into potential or actual risks, such as regulatory changes and pressures, partner requests, or the competitively changing sports landscape. Timely identification allows organizations to mitigate these risks, understand compliance with developing regulations, and build resilience for long-term success.

Long-term performance, partnership collaboration, and competitive advantage

Partners are a key piece of any sports team. Identifying an organization's highest priorities and setting goals demonstrates business growth and can attract new partners and fans that are aligned with an organization's values. Collaborating with like-minded corporate partners provides an advantage to drive sustainability goals further, enhance an organization's reputation and fan base, and increases reputational brand image.

Understanding the Needs and Expectations of Stakeholders

Identifying your most relevant sustainability topics is a critical step—but prioritizing action requires understanding the interested parties that those topics affect. Before activating your strategy, it's essential to engage your stakeholders—fans, communities, employees, partners, and others—to ensure your efforts are relevant, inclusive, and grounded in real needs.

Understanding stakeholder needs is paramount for the success of sustainability initiatives. Sports organizations must identify and engage with key stakeholders, including local governments, businesses, partners, and community groups, to align their efforts. Prioritizing impacted communities fosters collaboration and provides support where it's most needed. Open communications and feedback loops are essential for building credibility and addressing concerns. Digital engagement leverages vast platforms to involve fans and communities, ensuring a comprehensive and effective approach to sustainability.

1. Identify and Engage Key Stakeholders

- **Map Your Stakeholders:** Understanding who is affected by and involved in sustainability efforts. This includes event managers, partners, sponsors, workforce (employees, labor unions, staff, volunteers), suppliers, participants (exhibitors, athletes, speakers, performers), attendees (audience, fans, customers, spectators), community and regulatory bodies. Sports organizations can align themselves with sustainability efforts led by stakeholders rather than duplicating them.
- **Prioritize Impacted Communities:** Prioritizing partnerships with communities disproportionately affected by pollution and climate change can support those who need it most and encourage collaboration to come up with new solutions or initiatives.



2. Communication and Collaboration

- **Listening Sessions:** Create a space for open dialogue with communities to hear and address concerns. For example, stadium construction projects can impact air quality and noise levels. Engaging with the community at an early stage assists in mitigating potential adverse outcomes.
- **Sustainability Report:** Reporting will build credibility and keep your sports organization accountable. Communicating your sustainability progress, challenges, and next steps helps fans and partners stay engaged.
- **Digital Engagement:** Sports organizations have massive digital platforms. By leveraging social media and digital partnerships, you can involve fans and communities in sustainability initiatives.



3. Community-Led Sustainability Initiatives

- **Green Infrastructure Investments:** Installing solar panels and energy-efficient stadium lighting reduces your organization's carbon footprints. Solar energy and LED lighting cut emissions and operational costs, and these savings can be reinvested into local initiatives. In some cases, excess solar energy can even be shared with the community.
- **Transportation Access:** Working with transit authorities to improve public transit, bike access, and EV infrastructure reduces congestion and promotes low-emission travel options for your community.
- **Zero-Waste Game Days:** Partnering with local waste management organizations to improve recycling, composting, and food donation programs reduce landfill waste and supports circular economy initiatives. Sustainability clubs at local universities are a good source of volunteers to educate fans on proper waste disposal during games.

4. Leverage Sports Platforms for Advocacy & Education

- **Athlete & Fan Mobilization:** Athletes have immense influence. Engaging fans through athlete platforms, sustainability challenges, and community events make environmental action more engaging to fans.
- **Game Day Activations:** Stadiums can use screens and merchandise to spotlight sustainability messages, green sponsors, and community initiatives. Halftime activations can also engage fans with recycling challenges, carbon offset pledge stations, and athlete sustainability spotlights.
- **School & Youth Programs:** Partner with schools to create sustainability-focused sports programs and work with youth-led conservation projects. Donate recycled sports equipment and host workshops on reducing waste in athletics. As role models, athletes can inspire young fans by advocating for sustainability through school visits and community events.

5. Environmental Justice

- **Acknowledge and Address Disparities:** Environmental issues disproportionately affect marginalized communities, often limiting access to clean air, water, and safe recreational spaces. Sports organizations can use their platform to advocate for equitable policies and make sure that sustainability efforts benefit all communities, not just those with existing resources.
- **Support Local Environmental Justice Initiatives:** Partner with grassroots organizations working on climate resilience, pollution reduction, and access to clean air and water, especially in communities near stadiums and training facilities. Provide resources like funding, visibility, and volunteer support to amplify their impact and align sustainability efforts with your community needs.
- **Equitable Hiring and Procurement:** Prioritize hiring locally to align sustainability initiatives with direct benefits to the community. Work with local businesses in areas like stadium operations, merchandise, and event catering to promote economic growth.
- **Advocate for Policy Change:** Use your platform to push for policies that promote environmental justice, such as investments in clean energy, improved public transportation to stadiums, and pollution reduction efforts in areas impacted by industrial and sports-related activities.

Value Through Fan Engagement

1. Integrate Sustainability into Fan Experiences

- **Food and beverage system:** Implementing compostable packaging, locally sourced ingredients, plant-based options, and food waste recovery programs can reduce landfill waste and support local businesses.
- **Fan rewards program:** Tying in sustainable actions such as bringing reusable cups, recycling properly, or using public transportation can help incentivize positive behavior, and increase engagement and participation in your sustainable initiatives.
- **Halftime and pre-game entertainment:** Including sustainability pledge challenges, green mascot activations, or spotlighting eco-friendly initiatives by fans or the community can make sustainability engaging without disrupting the core sports experience.
- **Second-life merch program:** Encourage fans to trade in old jerseys, shoes, or gear for discounts on new sustainable products. Collected items can be upcycled, repurposed for community initiatives, or responsibly recycled, reducing textile waste and conserving resources. This initiative can strengthen brand reputation and differentiate your merchandise program.
 - **Example:** at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, an electric golf cart was filled with [clothes made of recycled plastic bottles](#) that were available to fans for purchase. Each shirt, made with 6.5 plastic bottles and water-based ink, showcased how waste was turned into value for green merchandising.

2. Digital Engagement

- **Interactive campaigns:** Educate fans and create a sense of shared responsibility by challenging fans to adopt greener habits, such as waste reduction or energy conservation.
- **Content:** Build credibility and attract sponsors by integrating sustainability updates, impact trackers, and behind-the-scenes efforts into organizational digital content like apps and websites.
- **Sustainability milestones:** Celebrating sustainability achievements with fans and other stakeholders. Through newsletters and press releases you can share key milestones like reaching zero waste goals or reducing emissions.

3. Waste

- **Waste sorting stations:** Improve recycling rates and minimize landfill waste by placing clearly labeled waste stations throughout the venue and educating fans on composting and proper disposal. For example, the [Pittsburgh Pirates](#) divert 70% of their ballpark waste from landfills annually, earning the Green Glove award multiple times for their sustainability efforts.
- **Single-use plastics:** Lower operational costs and your environmental impact by phasing out single-use plastics. Introduce alternatives like reusable cup systems and water refill stations that have been a success in events like Hard Rock Stadium's Miami Grand Prix. Through sponsor partnerships, you can offset costs by allowing brands to co-brand reusable cups or fund water refill stations in exchange for visibility and fan engagement. A successful example of single-use plastic elimination is [Hard Rock Stadium's](#) commitment to phase out 99.4% of fan-facing single-use plastic in its food and beverage operations, resulting in an elimination of 2.8 million units of plastic annually.

4. Measure and Communicate Impact

- **Real-time metrics:** Display real-time sustainability data in-stadium and online. Metrics can include waste diversion, energy savings, and carbon offsets that help fans see and easily understand the direct impact of their participation. Visuals and live updates create an interactive experience that encourages fan involvement.
- **Fan feedback and engagement:** Engage fans through surveys and feedback tools to understand their preferences and tailor initiatives to have greater participation and impact.



Involving Partners & Business Development Teams

Once you've identified your most relevant sustainability topics through a materiality assessment and engaged with the right stakeholder groups, the next step is turning your priorities into action. That requires the right internal champions and external collaborators.

Partnership and internal business development (BD) teams are critical to the success of sports sustainability programs. BD teams craft internal and external strategies in alignment with an organization's mission, vision, and values. In parallel, partnership teams identify and engage partners who offer specialized expertise, resources, and networks that can accelerate the execution of key strategies. When partnership and BD teams collaborate, it allows key partners to be leveraged, creating measurable business impact and valuable opportunities that advance sustainability goals.

Key Steps In Leveraging Partnerships

1. Market Analysis and Identifying Potential Partners

To identify impactful partnerships, sports organizations can conduct a thorough market analysis of current and potential partners that best support its sustainability strategy implementation. Sports organizations should assess potential partners that share similar sustainability goals who also provide complementary strengths, such as expertise in sustainable operations, technology, products, or access to renewable resources. Potential partners may include technology innovators, organizations with expertise in sustainable event management, and others focused on renewable energy, waste reduction, or circular economy solutions.

2. Strategic Planning and Early Integration of Partnerships

Once potential partners are identified, engaging partnerships and BD teams from the outset allows for mutually beneficial collaborations that align with long-term sustainability goals and deliver immediate value for both parties. This early involvement ensures that partnerships are well-positioned to support the organization's broader vision and creates tangible, shared impact across all stakeholders.



3. Cross-Functional Collaboration for Customized Partnership Proposals

Creating effective partnerships often requires internal collaboration to align with the organization's overall goals and identify potential challenges, opportunities, and synergies across various functions. BD, partnership development, and other internal teams can create tailored partnership proposals that are strategically aligned with the organization's goals. These proposals outline the partnership's benefits, scope, and structure, and are customized to create shared value. By focusing on mutual benefits and leveraging each partner's unique strengths, resources, and objectives, these proposals set the foundation for a successful collaboration. The cross-functional approach ensures that all elements—from financial viability to operational execution—are thoroughly considered and integrated into the proposal, paving the way for a sustainable, long-term partnership.

Cross-functional team examples: operations, marketing, sustainability, and finance

4. Building Relationships Beyond Transactions

Successful partnerships are not just transactional—they are built on long-term, mutually beneficial relationships. Fostering transparency and open communication with partners helps establish trust, laying a solid foundation for sustained collaboration. These relationships often evolve to support ongoing sustainability goals, whether through joint initiatives, community engagement, or shared resources. Building strong partner foundations enhances the effectiveness of sustainability efforts and creates new growth opportunities.

CASE STUDIES OF SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Several sports organizations have demonstrated the power of partnerships to achieve their sustainability goals:

- **Unrivaled Basketball League:** Unrivaled has strategically partnered with purpose-driven brands like Ally Financial that are committed to dismantling barriers in women's sports and promoting equity. These partnerships go beyond traditional sponsorship, providing financial empowerment resources, community initiatives, and platforms to highlight women athletes' talents.
- **Mercedes-Benz Stadium:** By collaborating with partners such as Cedar Grove Composting, Aramark, and Center Plate, Mercedes-Benz Stadium achieved its Zero Waste initiative, diverting a significant percentage of waste from landfills. This effort was integral to the stadium's sustainability strategy and helped establish it as a leader in green sports operations.
- **Sacramento Kings - Golden 1 Center:** The Kings partnered with local food producers to source 90% of their culinary ingredients within a 150-mile radius. This farm-to-fork initiative not only reduces the environmental impact of food transportation but also supports local agriculture and promotes healthy eating among fans.
- **NHL's Green Initiative:** The NHL's partnership with Constellation Energy and various sustainability-focused vendors allowed the league to offset its carbon footprint and implement renewable energy solutions across its venues. The NHL's sustainability efforts, including energy-efficient lighting and water conservation, have set a strong example for the league's member clubs.
- **Levi's Stadium:** Through partnerships with Silicon Valley Power and NRG, Levi's Stadium became net-neutral for energy usage during home games. The stadium also collaborates with Centerplate to source local, sustainable food, and has implemented extensive waste diversion programs, demonstrating how partnerships can drive both environmental and operational success.

Benefits of Leveraging Strategic Partnerships for Sustainability

- **Cost Reduction:** Strategic partnerships can lead to cost savings through more efficient operations, such as energy savings with clean energy partners or reduced waste management costs with sustainable vendors.
- **Access to Resources:** Partners can engage in a variety of ways from donation of product or service to in-kind exchange, financial resources to support sustainability efforts and access to networks to amplify the organization's efforts.
- **Expanded Consumer Reach:** Collaborating with eco-conscious sponsors or sustainable brands enhances brand reputation and expands market presence by providing exposure to new networks. Additionally, joint marketing efforts amplify visibility, engaging a broader audience and reinforcing the organization's commitment to sustainability.
- **Increased Business Opportunities:** Strategic partnerships can unlock new revenue streams and market opportunities. For example, FIFA has incorporated sustainability criteria into its selection of host cities for World Cup matches and an increasing number of artists and event organizers are building sustainability requirements into their venue selection process.

The Competitive Advantage of Sustainability Certifications

Implementation of a sustainability strategy shows dedicated progress to your organization, and certifications offer a powerful way to validate your efforts. They demonstrate credibility and commitment, reinforce internal systems, and support strategic growth.

Certifications serve as a benchmark for ensuring that sustainability principles are embedded into organizations and events and are important for demonstrating responsible use of resources. The following certifications offer a way for organizations and events to demonstrate that they have incorporated sustainability into planning and operations:

ISO 20121

ISO 20121 – A Sustainable Event Management System

The [ISO 20121 certification](#) recognizes that events are high profile and transient by nature, and can have positive and negative environmental, social, and economic impacts. As such, it is crucial for organizations involved in events, particularly in the sports and entertainment sectors, to manage these impacts, understand stakeholder priorities, achieve event objectives, and continuously improve their sustainability practices. Utilizing the ISO 20121 framework strengthens event sustainability and overall performance and ensures financial viability for long term success. By integrating sustainability across the entire event life cycle from planning and procurement to implementation, operations, post event breakdown, waste management, and performance analysis, organizations can evaluate their systems holistically.

The ISO 20121 management system follows a continual improvement cycle of Plan, Do, Check, Act. In the planning phase, stakeholders are identified, the system’s scope is defined, governing principles are established, and objectives are set. During implementation, resources are allocated, communication channels are strengthened and maintained, and operational controls are put in place. The system’s performance is then monitored through audits and management reviews to ensure that the system is correctly aligning with sustainability goals. Lastly, corrective actions are taken to address nonconformities.

The Competitive Advantage of ISO 20121

By completing the ISO 20121 certification process, organizations can show that they have incorporated sustainability into their event planning and operations, strengthened their reputation, increased brand value, and improved cost efficiency through optimized resource usage and reduced waste. ISO 20121 provides adaptable solutions suitable for organizations of all sizes, making it easier to implement compared to other standards without compromising on effectiveness or rigor. The financial benefits of adopting ISO 20121 include potential cost savings, improved operational efficiency, and greater appeal to stakeholders who prioritize sustainability, leading to increased revenue opportunities and long-term growth.

ISO 20121 certification provides:



Documentation of event planning, operations, and review, which helps with sharing and transitioning knowledge across their organization. Documentation is valuable for organizations as it helps maintain continuity in event execution.



Defined policies, objectives, and KPIs that help align event management practices with their broader goals related to sustainability, financial performance, and stakeholder engagement. This clarity allows organizations to monitor their performance in real-time and promotes continual improvement by highlighting areas of opportunity.



Compliance with sustainability best practices when planning and executing events. This includes minimizing environmental impact, promoting social responsibility, and improving financial sustainability. By adherence to these standards, organizations can strengthen their brand image and build trust with consumers.



Scalability to event planning through ISO 20121’s approach to event management. Implementation of standardized processes and guidelines helps organizations avoid the need for costly and time-consuming adjustments for individual events.



Proactively respond to the constant changes in the event industry, addressing turnover and ensuring consistent performance.

ISO 20121: Plan-Do-Check-Act



PLAN

- Identify interested party issues
- Develop policies
- Set objectives/targets with action plans to achieve

DO

- Implement the management system
- Engage stakeholders
- Integrate action plans into event operations

CHECK

- Measure and monitor target performance
- Conduct internal audit
- Complete management review

ACT

- Address corrective actions
- Certification audit with annual surveillance

CALLOUT



In August 2024, Gillette Stadium earned ISO 20121, Sustainable Events Management, certification. This prestigious certification encompasses Gillette Stadium, the Patriots, and the Revolution, making the Revolution the first MLS team to earn ISO 20121 certification.

LEED

The Case for LEED – A Green Building Certification

LEED, a certification administered by the Green Building Certification Institute (GBCI), is the most widely used green building rating system in the world. LEED certification can be applied to any kind of building, from new and existing commercial structures to residential homes, entire communities, and sports and entertainment venues. The LEED Operations and Maintenance (O+M) rating system specifically applies to existing buildings and is used to demonstrate efficiency in building operations across energy, water, and waste management, as well as transportation and occupant satisfaction. LEED O+M certification prioritizes the intersection of people, planet, and profits. The focus of the rating system is to recognize building owners for their commitment to increasing overall building efficiency while keeping building occupants healthy and satisfied.

Why is LEED Important to Sports Organizations?

LEED certified buildings publicly demonstrate their commitment to reducing emissions, cutting back on energy and water consumption, keeping waste out of landfills, and maintaining happy and healthy employees and visitors. A study¹ examining LEED-certified buildings estimated that they saved approximately \$7.5B in energy reductions and averted 33MT of CO₂ emissions over a sixteen year period when compared to baseline buildings.

A number of sports stadiums and arenas around the country have achieved LEED O+M and/or Building Design and Construction (BD+C) certification. The following table highlights some of these venues.

FACILITY	LEAGUE	HOME TEAM	LEED CERTIFICATION	KEY SUSTAINABILITY FEATURES
Moda Center	NBA	Portland Trail Blazers	LEED O+M – Platinum	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on recycling, composting, and food donation• Installation of EV chargers and support of alternative transportation
Oracle Park	MLB	San Francisco Giants	LEED O+M – Platinum	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use of irrigation clock which has led to 33-50% drop in irrigation water use• Implementation of ongoing commissioning plan
Providence Park	MLS	Portland Timbers	LEED O+M – Gold	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Replacement of incandescent fixtures with LED fixtures• Provision of free public transportation to and from games
Hard Rock Stadium	NFL	Miami Dolphins	LEED O+M – Gold	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offering alternative transportation options to fans• Use of biodigesters and recovery of kitchen oil into biofuel to reduce waste

¹ P M, X C, J B, J CL, J S, A B, J A. Energy savings, emission reductions, and health co-benefits of the green building movement. J Expo Sci Environ Epidemiol. 2018 Jun;28(4):307-318. doi: 10.1038/s41370-017-0014-9. Epub 2018 Jan 30. PMID: 29382929.

BENEFITS OF LEED

- Increase efficiency and reduce operational costs. Through analyzing operations driven by the LEED O+M framework, owners can identify inefficiencies, maintenance issues, and low- or no-cost improvements that save energy, water, waste and money.
- Obtain third party verification and tools for continuous tracking. LEED certification offers projects the opportunity to be externally verified by a well-known organization for their sustainability efforts and provides projects with an online platform, [Arc, to track improvements](#).
- Optimize tax benefits. Many cities and states offer tax breaks for buildings that achieve LEED certification. [Incentifind](#) is an online tool that helps owners identify green building incentives based on location.
- Enhanced visitor experience and stakeholder engagement. Through certification, sustainable educational components can be integrated into visitor experience and deepen stakeholder engagement and awareness.
- Meet today's increasing demand for sustainability. Sports organizations like the [International Olympic Committee](#), [FIFA](#), and [FI](#) are communicating their own sustainability goals and expect their partners to do the same. Spectators and employees similarly prefer to be in venues that prioritize clean air and inviting spaces.

EcoVadis

The [EcoVadis assessment](#) is a sustainability rating system that evaluates how well a company has integrated sustainability principles into its business and management system. EcoVadis has assessed more than 150,000 companies around the world and is becoming increasingly used in Europe by sports teams and with their corporate partners to help identify and manage their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) risks, build resilience in their supply chain, and communicate their sustainability performance to stakeholders. [Download a complete guide to the EcoVadis assessment here](#).

EcoVadis Advantages

- **Strengthening Corporate Partner Relationships:** Most organizations submit to EcoVadis because their corporate partners have requested the assessment. It is becoming increasingly common for companies to require certain scoring thresholds to be included in preferred partner lists or as a prerequisite to conducting business.
- **Staying Competitive:** Each rated organization will receive a scorecard after the assessment. Organizations can earn badges and medals as a communication tool to showcase their achievement in sustainability management. A strong EcoVadis score strengthens a rated organization's position as a favorable partner.
- **Understanding Sustainability Performance and Improvement Opportunities:** EcoVadis scorecards provide detailed and easy-to-read findings which allow rated organizations to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their sustainability management system. Helpful resources such as E-learning courses, tailored improvement recommendations, data dashboard tools, and corrective action plan templates are also available on the portal to guide your actions.
- **Getting Ahead of the Curve:** Companies are assessed annually, and medal allocation depends on their relative standing to peers. This creates a strong incentive for a company to improve its sustainability program and keep pace with the industry and increasing partner expectations. Continuous improvement proactively positions companies to become sustainability leaders and grants a competitive edge.
- **Reducing Sustainability Assessment Fatigue:** A company's annual EcoVadis scorecard can be shared with more than one partner, so organizations only need to fill in the questionnaire once, limiting questionnaire fatigue.

Ready to begin your EcoVadis journey? Learn more [here](#).

Communicating Your Sustainability Journey

With your strategy now grounded in purpose, priorities, and partnerships, the final step is making that impact visible by sharing your story. Communicating your sustainability efforts keeps stakeholders engaged, demonstrates accountability, and celebrates progress. It's also how you bring your values to life—embedding them into your brand and identity. Whether you're marking milestones, reporting progress, or inviting others to join you, sharing your story transforms sustainability from a strategy into a movement.

Recognition of Accomplishments

Awards and Certifications

Applying for sustainability awards and earning green certifications, such as LEED certification or ISO 20121, adds external validation to your organization's efforts. Awards bring credibility and trust and demonstrate to your stakeholders that your sustainability strategy is embedded in your operations.

Recognition from third-party organizations also attracts sponsors and partners looking for collaborations. Media coverage of these awards increases exposure and positions you as a leader in sustainability.

Branded Recognition Initiatives

Establishing your internal sustainability awards, like "Green MVP of the Year" for athletes, staff, and fans creates a culture of sustainability within the organization. You can engage stakeholders at all levels and incentivize participation in your sustainability initiatives. Honoring efforts is a way to continue celebrating sustainability and making it a part of your organization's identity.

This also presents a revenue opportunity, as internal awards can be tied to corporate sponsorships that include naming rights, branded trophies, or exclusive promotions. Sponsors gain visibility through displays around the stadium, social media mentions, and award ceremonies, while also showing their dedication to sustainability.

Themed Games and Events

Dedicating special game days to environmentally friendly initiatives become a way for fans to experience sustainability in action. Features like carbon-neutral games, zero-waste challenges, or "Green Game Nights" engage attendees and make sustainability part of the event experience. An example of this can be the "[Recycle Bowl](#)" game that the University of Michigan hosted where fans attempted to break a world record for the largest recycling event during their game against Oregon. During the event, more than 44,000 pounds of reused or recyclable materials were collected.

These initiatives create valuable sponsorship opportunities by giving brands visibility through naming rights, logo placements, and on-site activations during events. Additionally, partnering with vendors allows teams to introduce sustainable food packaging, highlight local businesses, and offer plant-based alternatives for attendees. These collaborations create opportunities for shared profits, co-branded marketing, and future supplier partnerships.

Digital and In-Stadium Recognition

Storytelling strengthens fan loyalty and recognition helps drive lasting impact and new revenue opportunities. Showing sustainability milestones on jumbotrons, social media, and websites keeps fans informed and makes progress visible. Sharing updates like waste reduction totals or renewable energy use helps shape the team's sustainability story in a real and relatable way. Climate Pledge Arena, home to the Seattle Kraken, [displays sustainability metrics on their website](#) that are updated at various times throughout the year.

Real-time impact tracking, like live updates on waste diversion or carbon offsets, allows fans to visualize how their actions contribute to larger goals. These efforts also open the door for sponsorships, giving brands opportunities to support sustainability through digital activations, branded leaderboards, and recognition during events.



Mascots

Mascot Storyline

Giving the mascot a backstory is a relatable way to connect environmental values with the team’s identity. A mascot could be portrayed as a champion of sustainable initiatives that advocates for clean energy and encourages fans to reduce waste. Weaving this storyline into promotions, events, and merchandise can make your organization’s sustainability efforts more approachable and appealing while using the mascot as a tool to educate and inspire future generations.

Game Day Activations

Mascots bring energy to the crowd and make game day more interactive. Through activities and challenges organizations can make sustainability an engaging part of the event experience. This can include a mascot-led jersey recycling drive, where attendees bring old team gear to be upcycled or donated in exchange for discounts; a sustainability scavenger hunt, where the mascot gives clues leading to sustainable venue features like recycling bins and water refill stations; and a cup return challenge, where the mascot encourages fans to return reusable cups to designated bins, making sustainability an engaging part of the game-day experience.

Sponsorship opportunities can be built into waste reduction and energy-saving initiatives, giving brands in these industries a chance to connect with fans while supporting sustainable solutions.

Media Presence

Mascots can have a strong presence on social media and act as a valuable tool for digital campaigns. Posting short, [entertaining videos](#) of the mascot related to sustainability, such as biking to the stadium, composting food scraps, or making simple swaps like using refillable cups can make sustainability feel more approachable and easier to adopt.

Digital activations create revenue opportunities through sponsored content, collaborations with people with strong media presence, and exclusive mascot merchandise. Limited-edition items, such as plush toys made from recycled materials, tote bags, or jerseys featuring the mascot, can connect fans to the team’s efforts and drive sales. Organizations can also offer paid shoutouts, where the mascot recognizes attendees or brands for their sustainability initiatives, creating a new way to engage the community and generate revenue.

Community Outreach

Mascots are a great way to connect with young fans, and bringing sustainability into schools and community programs helps introduce these ideas in a way that sticks. Partnering with schools and local groups to host storytelling sessions, activities like tree planting or park cleanups, and pledge programs give kids a chance to learn about sustainability in a way that feels natural and fun. These programs can also partner with brands to help fund events or educational materials, creating a way for organizations to support their community efforts.


Conclusion

Setting a strategy for sports organizations requires vision, adaptability, and commitment. By aligning organizational goals with the needs of fans, partners, athletes, and other interested parties, sports organizations can drive both immediate success and enduring legacy. With thoughtful planning and execution, they can continue to inspire and unite communities through the universal language of sports.



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