Championing Sustainable Products and Services: Approaches to Social Influence in Organisations.

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We are living in an environmental crisis, fuelled by overproduction and overconsumption, leading to excessive waste and pollution. The UN Sustainable Development Goals 2024 report states that the goals remain far from being met by the 2030 target. Nevertheless, the number of professionals working in roles dedicated to embedding environmental and social sustainability in organisations is growing. Many professionals voluntarily champion sustainability initiatives within their workplaces. Numerous recent studies have found that one of the most important skills required for sustainability roles is that of influencing others. This paper examines approaches to influencing strategic decision-making towards more sustainable products and services in organisations, through analysing discursive strategies for social influence. The paper identifies a methodological and contextual gap in research on social influence and proposes the usefulness of discursive psychology for understanding social influence in organisations. It thus adds new insights both for social psychologists studying social influence, and for organisation scholars studying how insiders change agents champion and sell issues to colleagues.

The paper uses qualitative data from two studies, to generate insights into social influence for sustainability in organisations as an interactional phenomenon. First, insights are gained from sixteen semi-structured interviews with sustainability-oriented product designers. The study explores how social influence for sustainability is conceptualized as either pushing or educating, and how entitlement to influence is managed in these contrasting ways. These data predominantly relate to efforts to convince decision-makers in industry to opt for more sustainable materials.

Second, a ninety-minute meeting between public procurement professionals and sustainability professionals is analysed, to identify discursive strategies for influence and resistance in action. In the meeting, procedures for requesting reporting on environmental and ethical supply chain practices from suppliers are discussed. Contrasting strategies for influencing sustainability are identified. Sustainability professionals either make tentative and hypothetical suggestions of possibilities, without evoking personal stake or interest. Or they give direct advice, strengthened by highlighting their professional expertise and their own stake in the outcomes. The analysis also identifies ways in which proposals are resisted.

Identifying contrasting ways of influencing sustainability in workplace meetings, along with associated resistance strategies, provides insights into current organizational practices. The possibility of influencing strategic decision-making towards sustainability, either forcefully or tentatively, parallels research on sustainability activism. The interplay between the different discursive strategies and matters of entitlement to influence, claims of stake, and depictions of expertise, provide insights for both sustainability practitioners and for researchers. Professionals seeking to influence strategic decision-making can reflect on the strategies they use or observe in their daily work. Further observational research using discursive psychology is recommended to better understand social influence for sustainability in action in organisations. A larger collection of such analyses can lead to generalisable knowledge on successful influencing strategies.