



EMPOWERING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS FOR CORPORATE CLIMATE ACTION

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**NET ZERO ACTION
ACCELERATOR**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Objective	4
Proposed Framework	4
How the Framework Works	4
Prior to Program Kickoff	5
Program Kickoff	7
The Business Case for the Proposed Framework	8
Anticipated Barriers	9
Conclusion and a Call to Action	10
Appendix	11
1. Project Scope Design	11
2. Recruitment and Communication	13
3. Project Work and Support	15
4. Participant Evaluation and Feedback Survey Template	17
5. EDF's Net Zero Action Accelerator Resources	18

INTRODUCTION

Climate goals have shifted from aspirational statements to operational imperatives. They are now central to how companies manage risk, boost efficiency, attract talent, drive innovation and create long-term value. However, achieving these goals remains a challenge, as execution often stalls due to siloed structures, competing priorities and limited ownership beyond the sustainability function.

The challenge isn't just about ambition — it's about integration. Many companies struggle to translate climate goals into everyday business practices. Key decisions around sourcing, product design, logistics and customer engagement often happen in isolation from climate strategy. According to [Accenture](#), only 16% of the world's largest companies are currently on track to meet their net zero targets by 2050. This shortfall represents more than a credibility gap; it's a growing operational risk.

While essential for mitigating climate risks, sustainability teams are often small, siloed and tasked with driving complex climate strategies across departments that may not fully understand their role in the process. Meanwhile, employees across procurement, logistics, HR, operations and product development are eager to contribute — [Deloitte research](#) shows that over 80% are willing to take climate action at work, and nearly half want to lead that change. Yet most feel they lack the structure, permission or clear pathways to engage. Closing this divide is critical to making climate goals actionable across the enterprise.

Climate action requires more than top-down targets. It demands broad-based internal engagement, where employees across roles feel empowered to identify and implement solutions. Despite this, many companies have not integrated climate into the everyday decisions, incentives and collaboration mechanisms that shape how work gets done.

To bridge this gap, the Environmental Defense Fund's Net Zero Action Accelerator has developed a structured, team-based engagement model designed to activate internal talent and embed climate thinking across the business. Our program brings together small, cross-functional employee cohorts to work on real-world sustainability challenges sourced from company leadership. These challenges may focus on emissions hotspots in the value chain, supply chain resilience, product innovation or supplier engagement — areas where employees already influence outcomes but haven't been engaged strategically in climate solutions.

By shifting the narrative from “climate as a sustainability team task” to “climate as a shared leadership opportunity,” this program builds internal momentum, strengthens collaboration, mitigates risks, fosters innovation and integrates climate thinking into daily business decisions. This isn't just a sustainability program. It's a leadership accelerator — and a catalyst for innovation, resilience and culture change.

Objective

Our framework empowers cross-functional cohorts of corporate employees to lead actionable climate initiatives through structured, challenge-based projects — aligned with their company's climate commitments, talent development, innovation strategy and business resiliency goals. The goal is to build climate skills capacity that creates long-term value across the organization.

Proposed Framework

This new employee engagement framework is designed for companies that recognize the need to embed climate action to mitigate risk but have difficulty translating goals into organization-wide execution. It is especially relevant for companies that need to strengthen cross-functional collaboration — particularly among teams like sustainability, procurement, operations, HR and innovation — where climate responsibilities may still remain siloed or underutilized.

The framework takes a multi-stakeholder approach, designed to align goals and incentives across key internal groups, including:

- **Sustainability teams and green champions** looking to build broader internal support for climate goals
- **HR and learning leaders** aiming to upskill and retain top talent through purpose-driven development opportunities with real impact
- **Executive and strategy teams** focused on climate risk, resilience and aligning climate action with business priorities
- **Procurement and supply chain leaders** who influence key emissions drivers and supplier relationships
- **Innovation and product teams** seeking practical pathways to integrate sustainability into business strategy

How the Framework Works

For companies looking to pilot this new framework, four core elements should be embedded in the initiative's design:

- 1 **A clear mandate to translate climate goals into business value** — including risk management, efficiency, innovation and long-term growth.
- 2 **Active sponsorship** from both HR and executive leadership positions this initiative as a strategic opportunity to develop and retain talent.
- 3 Engaged, mission-driven **employees committed to advancing climate action.**
- 4 Well-defined **incentive structures** for participants (e.g., bonuses, recognition and professional development credit).

These core elements are foundational to the four-step launch process detailed below.

Prior to Program Kickoff

To implement this team-based climate engagement framework, companies should follow a four-step process that aligns climate priorities with talent development, activates cross-functional teams and drives organization-wide buy-in.

Step 1: Defining the Most Strategic Climate Actions

- Company leadership (such as the chief of sustainability, HR leaders or an executive sponsor) defines the strategic climate actions the organization intends to prioritize and invest in. While this direction should be led from the top, it's essential to incorporate inputs from key internal teams interested in the company's climate action to ensure alignment, feasibility and buy-in across the organization.
- The company may choose to select multiple projects for each cohort, enabling different teams to work on distinct, high-priority climate action topics.
- Potential strategic climate actions may include, for example, evaluating and selecting climate tech solutions for tracking Scope 3 emissions, developing a supplier collaboration strategy, designing a plan to improve energy efficiency or researching options for procuring low-carbon and circular product alternatives.

Step 2: Presenting Climate Action Projects as a Talent Development Opportunity

- Once the most strategic climate actions are identified, they are translated into formal projects for cross-functional corporate teams to execute.
- Company leadership launches the initiative as a talent development opportunity — positioning it as a way for employees to build new skills while contributing directly to the company's climate goals, innovation and risk mitigation strategy.
- Time Commitment: Approximately 80 hours over three to six months, depending on project scope.
- Format: Primarily virtual, with the option for companies to sponsor in-person site visits to deepen understanding of the challenge and foster stronger stakeholder relationships.

**Step 3: Applying for
Selected Climate
Action Projects**

- Employees from relevant departments and locations are invited to apply for selected climate action projects, ensuring broad engagement across the organization.
- Initiative sponsors are encouraged to offer a mix of incentives, including: recognition (e.g., internal awards, internal newsletters, intranet spotlights and executive acknowledgment), career development opportunities (e.g., leadership stretch roles and performance review credit) and tangible benefits (e.g., spot bonuses and dedicated work time).
- Participation is presented as a leadership opportunity, with visibility through internal communications and potential advancement via internal credentials, development programs or access to high-level strategic initiatives (e.g., strategy sessions and conferences).

**Step 4: Selecting
Participants and
Forming Cohorts**

- HR and sustainability teams are responsible for selecting cross-functional cohorts — ideally three to five participants per team. Whenever possible, teams should reflect diverse key functions such as sustainability, legal, finance, procurement, logistics and operations.
- Selection criteria should include a formal application, relevant skills, leadership and development potential, past performance and a demonstrated commitment to advancing corporate sustainability.
- Each team should designate a program manager to ensure steady progress, coordinate meetings, track milestones and address blockers. This individual will also serve as the primary liaison between the project team and company leadership.

Program Kickoff

The success of this team-based climate engagement framework hinges on a well-structured participant journey — from initial onboarding to final presentation. Below is an overview of the key stages: Pre-Work, During the Assignment and Final Program Showcase.

Pre-Work

All participating teams take part in a shared kickoff and onboarding process, with opportunities to exchange learnings, access common resources and build momentum together throughout the program.

The kickoff and onboarding journey would include:

- Introduction to the company's climate goals, key drivers and the purpose of the program
- Team introductions and welcome from leadership team
- Collaborative refinement of project scopes, program timeline and final deliverables
- Review of program toolkit, learning resources tailored to each team's challenge area

During the Assignment

- Stakeholder interviews and initial research to ground projects in real business and operational context
- Progress reviews with the program manager and leadership sponsor to refine direction, address blockers and recalibrate goals as needed
- Mentorship and expert advising from internal or external subject matter experts relevant to the project topic
- Optional peer-share workshops to exchange insights and strengthen cross-team learning

Final Program Showcase

- Teams present their climate action solutions to internal leadership teams
- Highlight anticipated impact — such as emissions reductions, cost savings, resilience gains or innovation opportunities
- Share key learnings, implementation pathways, business value and recommended next steps
- Participants are recognized for their contributions, with benefits aligned to the initiative's potential impact on climate risk mitigation and net zero progress

The Business Case for the Proposed Framework

This climate engagement framework delivers value across operations, talent and strategy. It builds internal capability, drives cross-functional collaboration and supports innovation — while helping companies manage risk, meet regulatory demands and strengthen long-term resilience. For some companies, especially in the current environment, publicly leading on climate may not feel feasible, but they can channel that energy internally. By focusing on internal motivation, companies can maintain momentum, keep employees engaged and continue driving meaningful progress.

1 Builds Internal Capacity for Climate Action

- Provides hands-on experience solving real sustainability challenges while building climate literacy across departments
- Fosters cross-functional collaboration and shared ownership of climate goals, embedding responsibility beyond the sustainability team

2 Supports Talent Development and Retention

- Offers purpose-driven learning and leadership opportunities that engage and retain mission-aligned, high-potential talent
- Builds a pipeline of employees equipped to lead future climate initiatives across the business

3 Strengthens Business Resilience

- Identifies potential solutions for addressing operational and value chain risks through cross-functional climate analysis
- Strengthens readiness for climate disclosure and embeds sustainability into core decision-making to support long-term resilience

4 Fosters Business Innovation

- Uncovers actionable, cost-saving solutions that cut emissions and boost operational efficiency
- Fuels innovation for low-carbon, circular products and scenario planning to help teams anticipate and adapt to climate-related risks

5 Enhances Brand

- Strengthens ESG performance tracking and storytelling to meet investor and stakeholder expectations
- Elevates brand credibility as a climate-committed, purpose-driven organization

Anticipated Barriers

While a team-based climate engagement program can unlock significant value, successful implementation requires addressing common organizational barriers. From time constraints and limited incentives to unclear project scopes and cross-functional silos, these challenges can stall momentum. The table below outlines some obstacles that companies may face — and practical solutions to overcome them.

Barriers	Potential Solution
Competing Priorities and Time Constraints Employees may be hesitant to participate due to existing workloads. Without visible manager support and organizational flexibility, it's difficult for staff to prioritize this initiative alongside their core responsibilities.	Secure executive sponsorship and manager buy-in; allow protected time for participation within work hours.
Lack of Clear Incentives or Recognition If participation isn't formally linked to performance reviews, career growth or professional development goals, employees may struggle to justify the time investment.	Tie participation to performance reviews, leadership development plans and internal recognition programs.
Challenges Scoping Actionable Projects Companies may find it difficult to define clear, focused climate projects — especially if climate-related risks or emissions hotspots haven't been mapped. Without well-scoped challenges, teams risk losing momentum or confidence.	Have the executive team collaborate with the sustainability officer to first conduct a materiality assessment, identifying opportunities for climate action and ensuring strategic alignment with the business before launching any projects.
Limited Cross-Functional Coordination Climate issues often span procurement, operations, HR and finance. In siloed organizations, collaboration can be slow or ineffective without structured mechanisms for joint problem-solving.	Design intentional cohort structures and cross-functional team compositions; host regular touchpoints to align efforts and assign a program manager to ensure accountability across all team members.
Skepticism About Impact Some leaders may question whether employee-led efforts can drive meaningful climate outcomes — particularly if previous programs were perceived as symbolic. Early wins and alignment with strategic goals will be critical to build trust and demonstrate value.	Showcase early success stories and quantify impact; align projects with company climate and business objectives.

CONCLUSION AND A CALL TO ACTION

Companies aiming to accelerate climate progress shouldn't overlook one of their most valuable resources: **their own employees.**

Cross-functional teams bring climate action into the core of business operations, building internal capacity where it's needed most and generating solutions that align with both environmental and business priorities. By upskilling employees to lead climate initiatives, companies can reduce reliance on external consultants, foster innovation and embed lasting capabilities across the organization.

EDF is seeking a corporate partner to co-design and pilot this model. The participating company will gain access to foundational climate training, program management tools, expert mentorship and evaluation support — enabling its leadership team to launch a climate initiative that also advances strategic talent development. Starting with a small cohort or targeted challenge can

deliver early wins, produce compelling case studies and refine the approach for scaling this innovative employee engagement model across other companies.

The goal is not only to deliver tangible climate outcomes, but to strengthen the structures, relationships and leadership that make those outcomes sustainable. The talent already exists inside your organization. Now is the time to activate it.

Interested in a Pilot?

Contact EDF's [Net Zero Action Accelerator team](#) to discuss whether your organization is a fit and to schedule an exploratory call.



APPENDIX

Toolkit Components

To support successful implementation, this program is anchored by a practical toolkit designed to guide teams from kickoff to completion. These resources are tailored to meet the needs of companies launching internal climate engagement initiatives and they cover each phase of the participant journey. Whether a company is piloting a single challenge or scaling a multi-cohort initiative, these tools provide the structure and clarity needed to ensure cross-functional teams are aligned, supported and set up for impact.

1. Project Scope Design

Project Challenge Brief Template

This template is designed to help companies define and communicate a clear, actionable climate or business challenge for internal employee teams. It should provide enough context for participants to understand the strategic importance and scope of the project.

Project Title	Give your challenge a concise, descriptive title.
Background and Context	Briefly describe the climate or business problem you are aiming to solve. Include relevant internal goals, regulatory drivers or operational pain points.
Challenge Statement	Frame the specific question or opportunity for the team to address. This should articulate what the team is expected to learn, design or solve through this project.
Impact Potential	What business or climate-related impact would a successful project have? Consider emissions reductions, cost savings, stakeholder value or innovation potential.
Key Stakeholders	List internal or external stakeholders the team may need to consult or consider. Include departments, roles or external partners if applicable.

Available Resources	<p>Personnel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team members with defined roles and expertise • Support staff for admin and technical needs <p>Budget</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocated funds, including tools, materials and travel expenses (if needed) <p>Tools and Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Software for management, analysis and communication • Specialized hardware and devices <p>Training and Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training sessions and workshops • Technical support, mentoring and consulting <p>Facilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workspaces such as meeting rooms, labs and collaboration areas
Expected Deliverables	<p>Define the required format for the final output (e.g., presentation, report or recommendation memo) and outline any requirements for evaluation or implementation.</p>
Suggested Timeline	<p>Include any known milestones or deadlines that may shape the project timeline.</p>
Executive Sponsor or Point of Contact	<p>Provide the name and title of the person overseeing the project and available to the team for support.</p>

2. Recruitment and Communication

Program Participation Application Form Template

Title: Add your program title

Empowering employees to lead climate innovation from within

About the Program

This cross-functional initiative brings together a small group of motivated employees to address strategic climate challenges over a three-to-six-month period. Participants will collaborate in teams, supported by executive sponsors, sustainability leads and program coaches, to scope and develop actionable solutions.

Project Overview

For this cycle, the selected team will work on [briefly describe the specific project]. Key activities may include [mention two to three key activities, like stakeholder interviews, data analysis, solution design or prototyping]. The goal is to deliver recommendations to leadership that are ready for piloting or integration into business operations.

What You'll Gain

- Real-world experience tackling strategic corporate climate issues
- Exposure to cross-functional collaboration and systems thinking
- In-demand skills for the climate sector
- Opportunities for recognition within the company, potential pathways for career advancement and rewards for delivering meaningful business impact
- Contribution to your team's ESG and innovation goals

Expected Commitment

- An estimated three to five hours per week for 12 to 20 weeks, with the manager's approval
- Participation in program kickoff, midpoint review and final showcase
- Completion of team assignments, stakeholder engagement and solution development
- Active collaboration with teammates and sponsors

Applicant Info

- Name:
- Job Title:
- Department/Team:
- Location/Time Zone:
- Manager Name and Contact Info:

Motivation

1. Why are you interested in joining the Climate Action Cohort? What motivates you to participate, and how does this opportunity align with your role or professional growth? (150–200 words)
2. What strengths, skills, or experiences would you bring to a cross-functional team? Consider functional expertise (e.g., data, procurement, design or communications) or soft skills (e.g., facilitation, project management, systems thinking).
3. Have you previously worked on any sustainability- or innovation-related projects? If so, briefly describe your role and what you learned. (Optional)

Availability and Commitment

Upon receiving approval from your manager, are you able to dedicate three to five hours each week over a period of three to six months to contribute to this project?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Functional Expertise

Which of the following areas do you work in or have familiarity with? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Procurement
- ☐ Operations
- ☐ Finance
- ☐ HR
- ☐ Legal
- ☐ Product/Design
- ☐ Logistics
- ☐ Other: _____

Climate Insight and Challenge Focus

Upon reviewing the project scopes, which project(s) are you most interested in working on? Please list your top choice(s) in order of preference and briefly share why they interest you.

Which functions or topics are you most interested in exploring as part of your cohort project?

(Select top 3)

- ☐ Supplier engagement
- ☐ Packaging and product design
- ☐ Scope 3 emissions
- ☐ Circularity and waste reduction
- ☐ Operations and logistics
- ☐ Internal behavior and culture change
- ☐ Climate risk and resilience
- ☐ Energy use and efficiency
- ☐ Data and reporting
- ☐ Other: _____

Optional: Anything Else?

Is there anything else you'd like to share that may be relevant to your application?

3. Project Work and Support

Project Workplan Template

Use this template to structure your team's climate engagement project. Each phase includes key milestones, activities, deliverables, responsible roles and target completion dates. Customize according to your project scope and team composition.

Milestone	Key Activities	Deliverables	Responsible Roles	Target Dates
Kickoff and Team Onboarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team introductions Review project scope and timeline Access onboarding materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team charter Refined project scope 	Program manager, all team members	Week 1
Discovery and Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder interviews Baseline data collection Review existing tools/reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situation analysis brief Data summary 	Research lead, SME, program manager	Weeks 2-3
Midpoint Check-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal progress review Align on blockers, risks and new insights Receive mentor feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Midpoint progress update Updated goals if needed 	Program manager, team members, leadership Sponsor	Week 4
Solution Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorm and assess options Conduct analysis (e.g., cost, feasibility or emissions impact) Refine proposed solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft solution deck Preliminary implementation plan 	All team members, SME advisors	Weeks 5-7

Final Showcase Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalize recommendations • Develop presentation • Practice pitch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final presentation deck • Executive summary slide 	Presentation lead, program manager	Week 8
Program Showcase and Wrap-Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present to leadership • Submit final deliverables • Reflect on experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final solution presentation • Reflection summary or short report 	All team members	Week 9
Feedback and Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete surveys • Gather leadership feedback • Identify follow-on opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-program survey • Lessons learned document 	Program manager, HR, participants	Week 10

4. Participant Evaluation and Feedback Survey Template

Pre-Program Participant Survey

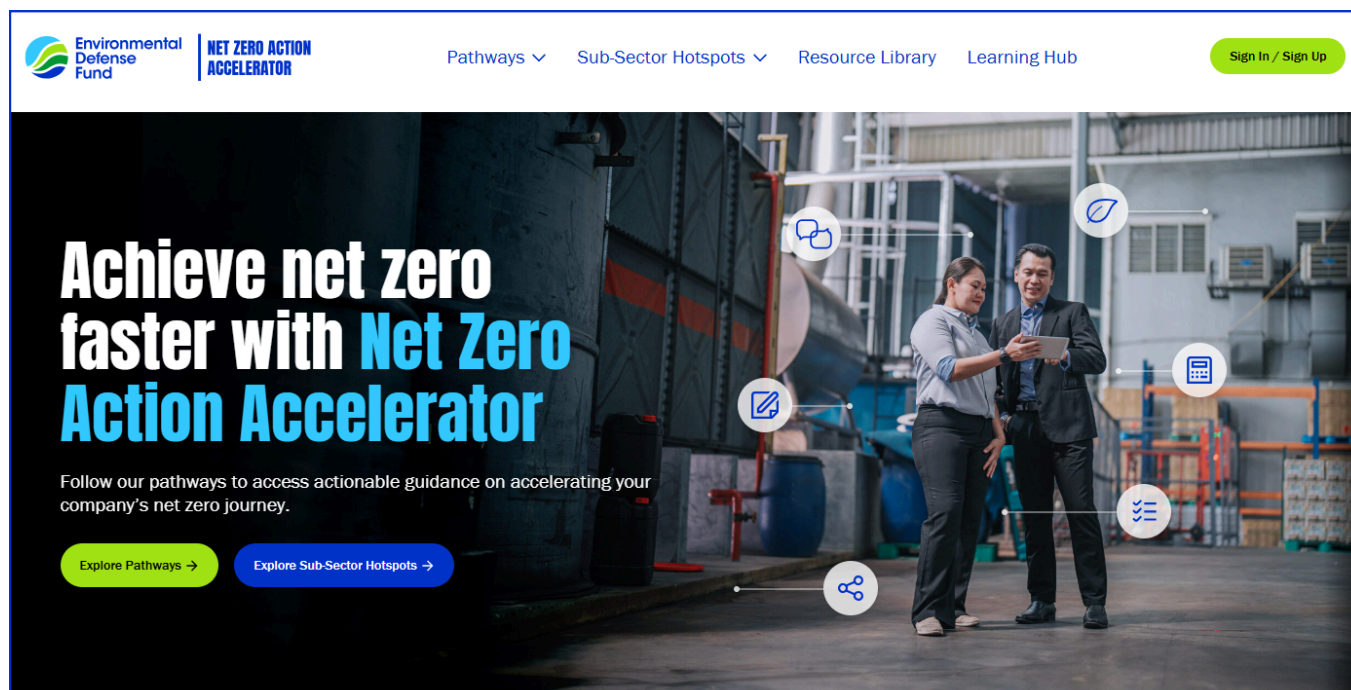
This survey template is designed to collect feedback from participants and executives before and after the climate engagement program. The goal is to measure learning, engagement, program experience and broader organizational impact. Sections are formatted for easy digital entry.

- How confident are you in your understanding of the company's climate action goals? (1–5 scale)
- How confident are you in your ability to contribute to climate-related projects? (1–5 scale)
- What do you hope to learn or achieve through participating in this program?
- What challenges do you anticipate in working on this project?

Post-Program Participant Survey

- How confident are you now in your understanding of the company's climate action goals? (1–5 scale) Why?
- How confident are you now in your ability to contribute to climate-related projects? (1–5 scale)
- What skills or knowledge have you gained through participating in this program?
- Describe one specific way your team's work can be applied or scaled within the company.
- How would you rate your overall program experience? (1–5 scale) Why?
- What are the opportunities for improving this program?
- How likely would you recommend this program to another colleague? (1–5 scale)
- Do you have any final comments?

5. EDF's Net Zero Action Accelerator Resources



[EDF's Net Zero Action Accelerator \(NZAA\) Web Hub](#)

A central portal for turning climate ambition into action.

[NZAA Net Zero Pathways](#)

Action steps that help you develop a roadmap aligned with your organization's top priorities.

[NZAA Resource Library](#)

A comprehensive collection of corporate net zero resources from EDF and trusted partners.

[NZAA Learning Hub](#)

Access webinars, e-learning modules, expert panels and short videos to deepen your understanding of net zero topics.

Foundational Resources

- [Understand Key Concepts](#)
- [Measure Emissions](#)
- [Set Science-Based Goals](#)
- [Develop a Climate Transition Action Plan](#)
- [Engage Internal Stakeholders](#)

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