

# Employee Engagement Resource Guide

## Behavior Change for Workplace Waste Reduction Programs

A practical toolkit for facilities managers, sustainability leads, and HR partners driving meaningful behavior change – from the break room to the boardroom.

BEHAVIOR FUNDAMENTALS

BEST PRACTICES

GAMIFICATION

IMPLEMENTATION



# Behavior Fundamentals

Understanding *how* people actually make decisions – quickly, habitually, and emotionally – is the foundation of any effective engagement program. Design for real human behavior, not ideal behavior.

## Attention Span & Convenience

People default to the easiest option. If bins are confusing or out of the way, contamination is almost guaranteed. Design for the "**2-second decision**": clear, matching color coding for bins and signs, large graphics/icons, and "most common item" examples at eye level. Limit the number of streams per station and keep setup consistent across the building to minimize choice overload.

## Habits & Routine

Most employees are on autopilot during breaks, at printers, and in kitchens – they are *not* reading signs every time. Redesign the environment for centralized bin stations, not individual "desk side" bins, so the right action becomes the habitual one. Use consistent placement – same order, same colors, same wording – so a habit learned in the break room transfers seamlessly to the department floor.

## Emotional Buy-In & Resistance

Common barriers include "My effort doesn't matter," "Work isn't the place for this," or "This makes my job harder." Connect diversion to outcomes employees care about: cost savings, community benefit, and brand reputation. Make it about **team identity**, not a corporate mandate. Build trust by acting on feedback about friction points.

# Reasons & Drivers for Engagement

Frame every initiative around a clear **"why now?"** so it feels timely and legitimate – not another corporate mandate dropped from above.

## External Policy & Ordinances

Translate abstract regulations into concrete facility impacts: required organics collection, reporting deadlines, potential fines. Position leadership as proactive by staying ahead of regulations, not reacting to them.

## Clarify How-to-Participate

Campaigns should answer: what goes where, what's changed, and the top 5 problem items. Combine short emails, digital signage, table tents, and a 2-3 minute huddle script, among other tactics. Use **real photos from your own bins**, not stock imagery, to build credibility.

## Introducing New Systems

Treat new collection systems like product launches. Tease the change, show before/after scenarios, and pilot in one area first. Feature pilot champions in wider rollout communications and offer a hands-on walkthrough so people physically practice the system.

## Motivation via Events

Leverage events like America Recycles Day, Earth Month, or ESG report releases. Run short, focused campaigns: "30 days to cut contamination by 25%" with a visible metric. Tie participation to community impact: donations per pound diverted, or volunteer events with local recycling partners.

# Best Practice Principles

## Social Norms

Make the desired behavior **visible and normal**. Use descriptive norms: *"Most teams on this floor are correctly sorting over 80% of their waste"* – rather than "Please stop contaminating." Full multi-stream stations, visible signage, and clear documentation signal that this is simply how things are done here.

Highlight green team champions, custodial staff, and high-performing departments to reinforce waste diversion as the cultural norm.

## Commitments & Behavior-Change Techniques

- **Public commitments:** Pledge boards, team-level goals, or leadership signing a visible zero-waste statement
- **Implementation:** Encourage simple 'if-then' plans – "If I finish my soda, then I first look for the blue bin"
- **Point-of-decision prompts:** Stickers on common items (e.g., "Recycle me in the blue bin") and arrows from equipment to the correct bin. Try a shadow box example of actual items
- **Feedback loops:** Share contamination audits, before/after photos, and short success stories so people can see their collective impact

# Gamification

Use gamification to make participation feel **engaging, not childish**. Tailor depth to your workplace culture. For example, approaches that work in a tech office may differ from a manufacturing floor or financial services environment.



## System & Bin Design

Centralize stations so employees confront the full set of options. Use standardized color coding across the entire facility, shaped lids, and restrictive openings. Pair bins (landfill always next to recycling and compost, if your company offers it). Add quick feedback cues – "top 5 items here" signs – to reduce hesitation.



## Competitions & Challenges

Run floor-by-floor or department competitions based on measurable metrics: % of contamination rate lowered, % of recycling rate increased, or campaign participation. Keep challenges time-bound – 4 to 6 weeks – with a clear baseline, target, and visible progress updates. Include storytelling: brief case studies of how the winning team redesigned their habits or space.



## Recognition & Incentives

Non-monetary recognition often matters most: shout-outs in all-hands meetings, digital leaderboards, and internal news stories. Rotate recognition so it doesn't always go to the same department – highlight *progress*, not perfection. For incentives, use light rewards tied to **collective outcomes** (site-wide contamination reduction) to reinforce teamwork, not individual gaming.

# Engagement Across the Employee Lifecycle

Map engagement to communication "moments" – from a new hire's first week to a veteran employee's daily routine. Meet people where they are.

## Onboarding

**1**

Include a 5-10 minute waste systems segment in every new hire orientation. Provide a one-pager with a QR code or a micro-video link. Have managers walk new hires to the nearest station in their first week.

## Face-to-Face Moments

**3**

Short bin-side tabling sessions or "bin tours" during peak times correct more behavior than several emails combined. Empower green team champions to run 5-minute huddles and quick demos. Use in-person moments to listen – then visibly act on feedback.

**2**

## Ongoing Communication

Use multiple formats: bin signage, intranet, short videos, digital displays, and supervisor talking points. Keep language simple – top contaminants, "always/never" rules, 2-3 key actions per campaign. Small nudges embedded in existing channels work best.

**4**

## Ongoing Reinforcement

Brief refreshers in staff meetings, seasonal campaigns, and quick visual reminders when contamination data shows a backslide. Anchor refreshers to moments like Earth Month or new ESG reports to maintain relevance and energy.

# Implementation Structure & Metrics

A strong governance model and simple data tracking turn a one-time push into a continuously improving program. Executives and site leaders need to see the system, not just the results.

## Governance

Clearly define who owns the program – sustainability, facilities, EHS, or a cross-functional green team. Document how these groups coordinate: weekly check-ins, shared dashboards, and clear escalation paths. When ownership is ambiguous, execution stalls.

## Continuous Improvement

Conduct annual or semi-annual "tune-ups" of bin placement, signage, and training content based on regular waste auditing, data analytics reporting, and staff feedback. Treat the program as a product – always in iteration, never fully finished.

## Key Metrics to Track

### Diversion Rate

% of total waste diverted from landfill – the headline metric for ESG reporting and external benchmarking.

### Contamination Rate

% of recycling or organics loads rejected or downgraded – a direct measure of employee sorting accuracy.

### Participation

Engagement in campaigns, challenges, and training. This helps track whether your communication is reaching people.

# Key Takeaways

A successful employee engagement program isn't a single campaign – it's a system of overlapping design, communication, and recognition strategies that make the right behavior the **easy, normal, and rewarding** choice.

## “?” **Design First, Communicate Second**

No amount of signage overcomes a poorly placed or confusing bin. Fix the physical environment before launching a campaign.

## **Make It Local and Real**

Use your own photos, your own data, and your own champions. Generic messaging is ignored; specific, site-level stories change human behavior.

## **Connect to What People Care About**

Cost savings, community impact, team pride, and compliance risk reduction are more compelling than abstract environmental messaging for most workplace audiences.

## **Measure, Share, and Iterate**

Close the loop with your workforce: share contamination data, celebrate wins, and visibly act on feedback. Transparency builds ownership, ownership steers accountability, and accountability drives lasting change.

# Courtesy of Zero Waste Strategies LLC

**Zero Waste Strategies** is a team of vetted Business Consultants and TRUE Advisors helping clients reduce waste for increased revenue, employee empowerment, and a green marketing edge. Clients include Dell Technologies, AT&T, Apple, AbbVie, Nestle' Purina, Kohler Co., Boston University, and the City of Austin.

## **Zero Waste Services:**

- TRUE Zero Waste Certification
- Waste Auditing
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