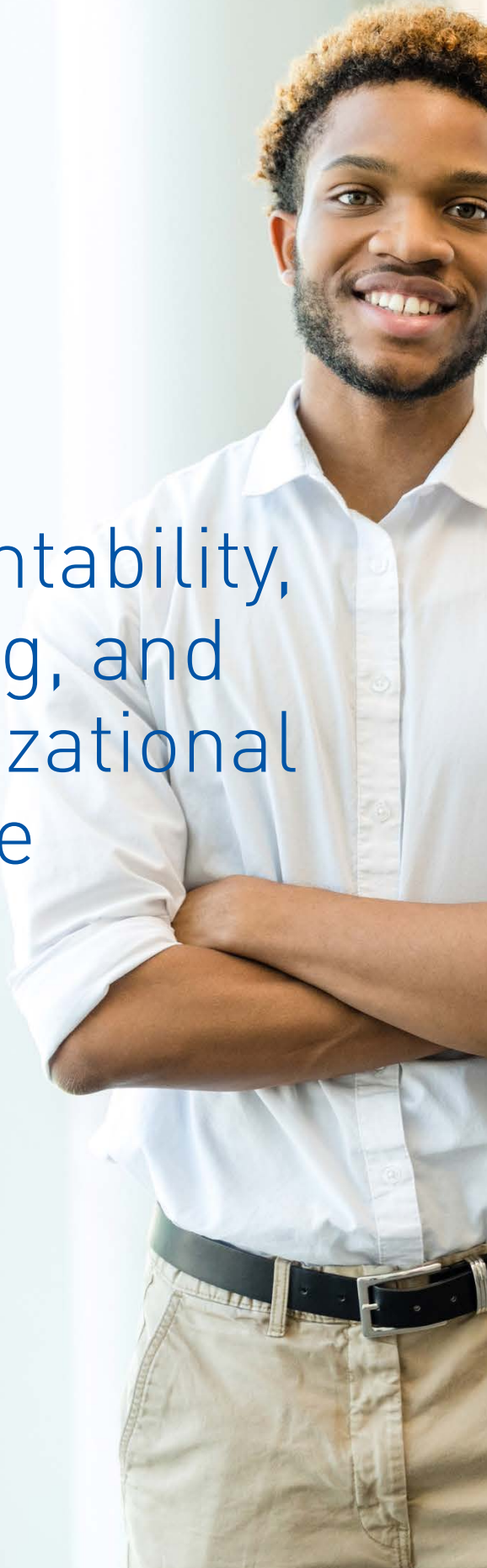




# Accountability, Staffing, and Organizational Culture



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Define clear roles and responsibilities to drive climate action.
- Empower employees with the skills and knowledge to contribute to climate goals.
- Cultivate a culture that prioritizes and rewards climate-positive actions.
- Promote collaboration and communication across all departments and levels.





# INTRODUCTION

A culture of accountability and a workforce empowered to take action are foundational to advancing progress towards net zero. This starts with integrating climate goals into organizational governance structures by establishing mechanisms for accountability and oversight and defining roles and responsibilities.

Utilities also must equip their workforce with the skills, tools, and resources needed to achieve climate goals. This means making sure employees understand how climate change impacts the organization and the community it serves, the steps the utility is taking to respond and adapt, the solutions behind emissions reduction, and their role in supporting these efforts. Finally, by cultivating an engaged workforce, utilities can mobilize staff at every level to contribute meaningfully to net-zero goals.

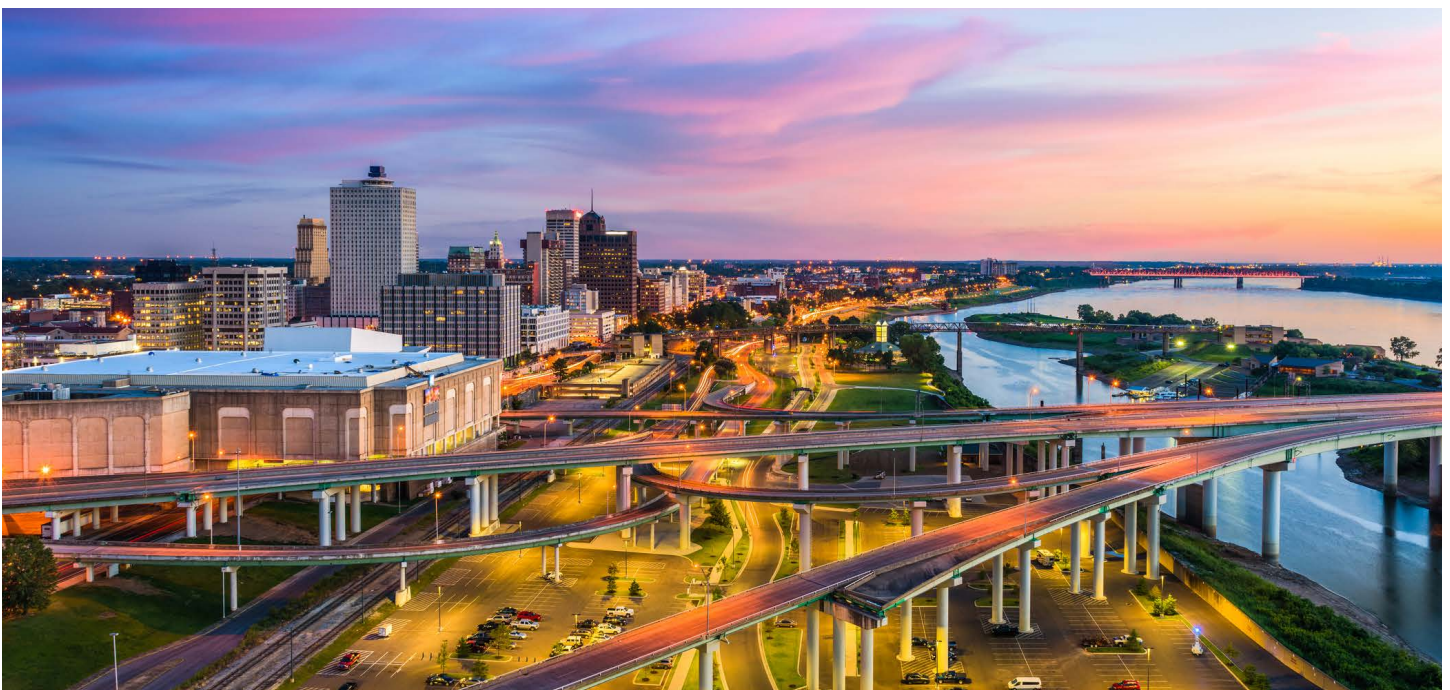
# ACTIVITIES AND ACTIONS

Building a culture of accountability and a climate-ready workforce requires a multifaceted approach. This section explores key actions for establishing accountability structures, building a skilled workforce, and fostering a supportive organizational culture.

## Establishing Accountability Structures

***Tip:** Assign specific greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction responsibilities to executive leaders (e.g., a chief sustainability officer) to elevate emissions reduction to a strategic priority.*

Accountability must be driven from the top. For instance, governing bodies should set clear emissions targets and hold leadership accountable through structured reporting and oversight. Senior leadership must embed climate objectives into daily operations, decision-making, and overall organizational strategy. Accountability structures should cascade through performance evaluations, ensuring that climate goals are embedded in departmental objectives and individual performance reviews. Departments should have clear GHG reduction targets, direction, and resources to support emissions reduction.



## Building a Climate-Ready Workforce

**Tip:** Implement regular training programs to help staff understand the significance of climate action and how their roles directly contribute to organizational targets.

A climate-ready workforce is essential for achieving GHG reduction objectives. Utilities need to invest in developing a knowledgeable and skilled workforce that is capable of addressing climate challenges effectively.

Regular training programs should be implemented to help staff understand the significance of climate action and how their roles directly contribute to organizational targets. Specialized training in emissions reduction opportunities, energy efficiency best practices, and renewable energy technologies empower employees to take informed and impactful actions. Training and professional development programs, including leadership programs, should be systematically aligned with GHG reduction goals, providing employees at all levels, including managers and team leads, with the necessary skills and knowledge to integrate emissions reduction considerations into everyday decision-making.

In addition, sufficient staffing resources must be allocated across all relevant departments with clear responsibilities for climate action integrated into job roles.



## Fostering an Organizational Culture Aligned with Climate Goals

**Tip:** Implement employee recognition programs that highlight contributions to GHG reduction initiatives, fostering a sense of ownership and accomplishment.

Organizational culture significantly influences the success of GHG reduction initiatives. To create a culture that genuinely supports emissions reduction, leaders must embed climate goals into the company's values and integrate them into everyday routines and decision-making processes. This requires visible and consistent support from leaders, demonstrating the organization's commitment to GHG reduction. Utilities can use various communication channels like internal newsletters, workshops, and town hall meetings to keep climate objectives visible and foster a collective sense of purpose across the organization.

Recognition programs play a crucial role in promoting desired behaviors and motivating employees. These programs can include public acknowledgment of achievements, awards for outstanding contributions to GHG reduction, or opportunities to participate in high-profile sustainability projects. Creating structured opportunities for employees to propose GHG reduction initiatives, such as innovation programs or employee-led sustainability committees, can further strengthen engagement and ownership. Moreover, utilities should foster a strong commitment to workforce engagement, ensuring that staff are fully empowered and motivated to advance GHG reduction efforts.

# KEY CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Effectively integrating climate accountability and building a workforce prepared for GHG reductions can present challenges. Below are common obstacles and actionable solutions.

## Lack of Clear Accountability Across Departments

Without a clear accountability structure, embedding climate action into governance and defining each organizational unit's role in achieving GHG reduction targets can be difficult.

### Solutions:

- Clearly define roles and responsibilities within each organizational unit to advance climate targets, ensuring climate action is a shared organizational goal rather than a siloed effort.
- Integrate GHG reduction responsibilities into leadership roles at all levels and incorporate emissions reduction metrics into performance evaluations for managers and supervisors.
- Implement structured reporting to regularly convey climate progress up through top organizational leaders to the governing board.

## Insufficient Climate Knowledge and GHG Reduction Expertise

A lack of climate knowledge and GHG reduction expertise can hinder effective emissions reduction efforts.

### Solutions:

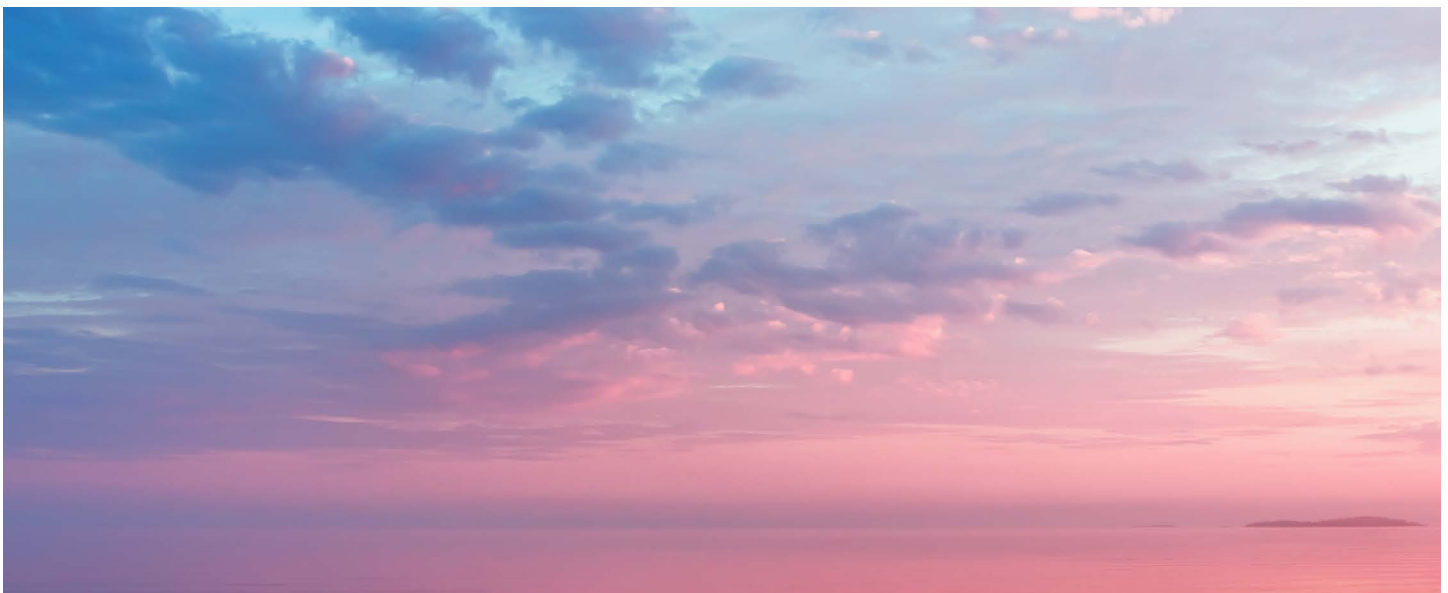
- Provide regular workshops and training on GHG reduction strategies, including energy efficiency, renewable energy, and emissions monitoring.
- Partner with industry experts to offer specialized training programs and certifications.
- Create an in-house mentorship program or join peer learning networks that pair employees with experienced climate professionals to support knowledge transfer and hands-on learning.

## Cultural Resistance to Change

Resistance to change can slow the adoption of climate initiatives.

### Solutions:

- Engage staff through participatory workshops, focus groups, and open forums to encourage buy-in.
- Identify and empower early adopters as champions to model and promote GHG reduction practices.
- Reinforce a climate-focused mindset by integrating employee feedback into GHG reduction strategies.





# Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District— Turning Organizational Culture Into a Climate Action Driver

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORSRD) has built a culture of climate accountability that extends from leadership to frontline staff, ensuring that sustainability is more than a policy and serves as a fundamental part of the organization's identity. This approach reflects the utility's history, shaped by the environmental challenges that led to the infamous Cuyahoga River fire and the ensuing response. That legacy now fuels a strong institutional commitment to environmental stewardship and emissions reduction.

NEORSRD recognizes that achieving net-zero emissions requires more than technical solutions—it demands engagement at every level of the organization. By integrating climate education, employee-led sustainability initiatives, and leadership-driven accountability, the District ensures that its workforce is empowered to actively contribute to emissions reductions.

Equally important is the use of strategic internal communications through People & Progress updates, intranet stories, and digital signage to share progress and reinforce sustainability as a core part of workplace culture. These channels help normalize climate action and keep it visible across the organization.

**Key Insight:** A strong culture of accountability supported by consistent communication helps ensure that emissions reduction is embraced across all departments; not just within sustainability teams.

## A Climate-Ready Workforce: Aligning Employee Engagement with Net-Zero Goals

NEORSRD integrates climate awareness in new staff orientation, ensuring that employees understand their

role in reducing the District's environmental footprint from day one. Employees are encouraged to think beyond individual actions and consider how the utility itself can lower emissions while maintaining high-quality service.

A standout example of this bottom-up engagement is NEORSRD's Sustainability Employee Resource Group (SERG)—the largest SERG in the organization with 50 members. Employees are nominated and supported by their managers, ensuring broad participation across teams. The group focuses on both education and action, offering workshops on safe bike commuting, the District's role in Cleveland's Climate Action Plan, and the impacts of climate change on Lake Erie.

These efforts are regularly featured in internal communications, helping staff see themselves reflected in the District's climate journey.

*"People at all levels within the organization are connecting around a common theme," said Marie Fechik-Kirk, Manager of Sustainability and Special Projects at NEORSRD. "Staff know who to go to share ideas with the potential of making things happen. People feel more empowered to drive initiatives that have sustainable co-benefits."*

**Key Insight:** Creating structured employee-led sustainability groups fosters cross-functional collaboration and empowers staff to advance emissions reduction initiatives.

## Recognizing and Rewarding Climate Action

NEORSD reinforces its culture of accountability by recognizing employees who contribute to sustainability. Quarterly awards celebrate innovation and initiative, ensuring that staff contributions to emissions reduction are acknowledged and incentivized.

A recent example of this employee-driven climate leadership comes from the instrument technician team, which participated in a Water Research Foundation project to measure methane emissions in sewer systems. This project required technical expertise, collaboration, and innovative problem-solving, demonstrating how employees at all levels play a role in reducing the District's carbon footprint.

*"At NEORSD, sustainability is something that we do—our instrument techs are the ones who made this project happen," said Marie.*

Recognizing and communicating these achievements builds pride and shows that sustainability is part of everyday work.

**Key Insight:** Celebrating employee contributions and communicating them effectively drives engagement and helps embed climate action into the organizational identity.



## Driving Innovation: Tackling Methane Emissions with Cutting-Edge Research

Methane is a particularly potent greenhouse gas, with 34 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide. While wastewater conveyance naturally produces methane, there is still uncertainty about how much is emitted and whether it's feasible to capture and use it as fuel.

To answer this question, NEORSD is participating in an international study on methane emissions in wastewater collection systems. District staff collected their first liquid and gaseous methane samples in 2024, with results expected in 2025. The study aims to improve emissions measurement, close gaps in greenhouse gas inventories, and identify opportunities for mitigation.

*"We hypothesize that methane emissions vary with climate," said Marie. "Drier, warmer conditions could increase emissions while wetter conditions might have the opposite effect. Understanding this variability is key to reducing our overall footprint."*

**Key Insight:** Investing in emissions research ensures that utilities can prioritize the most impactful reduction strategies and close data gaps in GHG inventories.



## Looking Ahead: Expanding Climate Accountability and Strategic Innovation

NEORSD continues to integrate climate action into its strategic planning by aligning emissions reduction initiatives with financial and operational priorities. This includes exploring renewable electricity opportunities at NEORSD's Southerly Plant with a focus on cost-effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

*"We're looking at renewables in a way that makes sense for both our sustainability goals and financial strategy," said Marie. "Even our finance team is engaged, helping us evaluate creative solutions we might not have before considered."*

**Key Insight:** Climate progress accelerates when leadership alignment, employee engagement, and clear, consistent communication move in tandem.



NEORSD employees take part in a sustainability listening session—one of the many ways the District regularly engages staff to build a culture of climate action. Photo credit: NEORSD.



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

For additional guidance, consider exploring best practices for integrating climate accountability into performance management, building a climate-ready workforce, and fostering an organizational culture aligned with climate goals.

1. Explore the Water Research Foundation's guidebook for water utility sustainability champions: [Changing Organizational Culture to Promote Sustainable Water Operations](#).
2. Enhance organizational climate literacy for a basic understanding of the climate system and climate science for climate-informed decisions. Check out specific modules on [Climate Change Science and Modeling](#) and [Responses to Climate Change](#), or explore [USDA's Climate Hubs](#).
3. Check out Project Drawdown's [Job Function Action Guides](#) to see how employees across roles can drive climate action while aligning sustainability with business goals. Each guide offers role-specific strategies to integrate climate considerations into daily work, strengthening the business case for sustainability.
4. Visit C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group's [Knowledge Hub](#) for information on topics like climate action planning; governance, collaboration, and engagement; and inclusive and equitable climate action.

This paper is part of Net Zero Fundamentals, a collection of action-oriented briefs designed to help water and wastewater utilities cut climate pollution and chart a clear path to net zero. Each brief delivers practical insights, real-world utility examples, and implementation guidance for immediate impact. Access the collection of briefing papers on the US Water Alliance [website](#).



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