



## The Green Workplace and Human Behavior

[Just Business \(Interview Series\)](#)

[Leigh Stringer](#), [Julia Taylor Kennedy](#)

**JULIA KENNEDY:** Welcome to *Just Business*, a series of interviews on global business ethics.

Today we're discussing human behavior and the green workplace. Architect and sustainability expert Leigh Stringer will shed light on this important component of corporate social responsibility.

Author of a book called *The Green Workplace* and a [blog](#) by the same name, Stringer is convinced that [LEED](#) [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design] green buildings are only a piece of the puzzle to designing a sustainable office.

Leigh Stringer, welcome to *Just Business*.

**LEIGH STRINGER:** Thank you.

**JULIA KENNEDY:** Let's start where I left off in that introduction. As an architect, aren't you supposed to be focused on designing new green buildings? So why have you started to look at human behavior and workplace change?

**LEIGH STRINGER:** Well, there's no question that, working for an architecture firm, we live and breathe green design, and the zero-carbon-footprint buildings are all the rage these days, and getting to them is actually quite difficult.

In a recent study, we looked at a typical developer building and were trying to figure out how do we really make this net-zero over the long haul, not just on day one when we put the shovel in the ground and declare the building finished.

We realized that we couldn't get there alone, we couldn't get there with beautiful design and nice green walls and perfectly energy-efficient mechanical systems and all of that. We really needed more.

In fact, we did a study looking at commercial buildings that have tenants in them and figured that around 60-70 percent of the energy used in a building actually has to do with the tenants themselves, not necessarily with the building itself. The energy that tenants use related to their servers, their technology, their lighting, and the HVAC is actually a pretty significant portion. The part that they can turn off and on actually does have a huge impact. So that's the point where we realized we needed to do a lot more.

Another interesting study that we found out recently, and this kind of ties in—it's a residential study, but I think this touches everybody and what they're working on and how they're using their space at home and at work—that is a study done by the World Business Council about six or seven years ago at this point. It looked across six different countries and, across these six different countries, hundreds and hundreds of residential units.

The focus was purely on energy. They found out that when they encouraged people to insulate their windows and do all kinds of physical changes to their buildings or to their homes, weatherstripping and all that kind of good stuff, they reduced the energy load by about 30 percent unilaterally across these six different countries and all these different residential types, which was pretty significant.

But then they found that conservation behavior could save another 20-30 percent by unplugging things—my goodness, all these appliances that we say are vampire eaters of energy; turning off lights; not everybody has an automatic thermostat, so installing those. Just basically being aware of all the energy they're using every day and clicking it off.

**JULIA KENNEDY:** Another study that I read about in your book that seems relevant here is that actually we're not constructing new buildings that frequently, especially in this economic downturn.

**So tell me a little bit about how there are steps that companies can take in the short term to green their practices.**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** Right.

So one of the things that I learned through talking to lots of organizations about cool new ways that they could green their business and their buildings and whatnot was that all these different strategies fell into one of four categories. It's kind of on a spectrum.

On the one side are things like changing the design, the physical design of the building, building a new building or upgrading the one you have.

Then there are things like operational strategies, which have to do with reducing paper waste by going with double-sided paper or green paper. A lot of the procurement, for example, in an organization might be to green what you buy and green how you use it and how much of it you use and then think about how you deal with the waste when it's done. All those have to do with pretty much organizational policies, but maybe at a higher level kinds of things.

And then there's technology and all the different ways—you know, the cool new apps out there that you can download yourself or your team can download, for example, that will increase your awareness of your energy use at the workstation. There is a little product called Green Print that I think is fantastic—it will help you print more efficiently. Also there's a power strip that you can just click off so all your electricity or your appliances that require energy click off at one time. That's a simple way, just using a power strip. Or one that has an automatic timer, since when you leave, you might forget.

And then there's all the human behavior stuff, which have to do with you remembering to turn that power strip off or click off the light and things like that.

When it started off, it there were things that are harder for individuals to effect. You know, not everybody is involved with designing a new building. It's a few people in the organization, it's actually a very small group, and it takes a lot of money to do that. The operations stuff, yeah, it's a little bit easier to do, but it requires usually some sort of a policy change or some muckety-muck in the organization to make a decision to change something.

Technology—you know, maybe it's a little bit easier to do. And your human behavior you can change right this second.

So on the spectrum it's a lot easier to start with the human behavior and do that first and then see what sort of effect you can have on the organization, just yourself or your team or your department, and measure it and see how that's working for you.

But I think organizations now realize, getting back to your point about the capital cost of making these big choices and big design moves, that you can do so much, as we were talking about in these previous studies, by just changing your behavior or adopting a couple of new technologies and trying those out.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Now, with behavior change often comes resistance. You know, people have habits. So from a management perspective, how can managers who have decided "we want to implement some green strategies in our company"—what are some general ways—and you've done a great job in this book of making it applicable across sectors—what are some ways of approaching employees to really change the carbon footprint of the office?**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** This kind of goes back to basic rules of change management, I guess, you know, business school 1.01, but also just really understanding people and where they're coming from when it comes to the environment.

I think when you ask somebody what you care about—"Why is the environment important to you? Why are you a greeniac and why are you carrying the banner for the environment?"—people give you very personal reasons: "It has to do with my children; I want to see them grow up in a world that I had lived in" or, "I met someone in a third-world country who lived in a deplorable trash-ridden area," or something. It's a very personal story that gives them kind of an emotional need and a desire to make change in themselves personally as well as encourage it in others.

I think understanding that as a baseline is really important, and also understanding that not everybody thinks the environment is the most important thing, not everybody believes that the environment is in very much trouble. There is some interesting debate happening out there about that. People tend to listen to who they believe in the first place. So it's a little difficult sometimes to approach people with a green card and say, "Well, don't you care

about the environment?" Well, they don't always or it's not their first priority.

So one way that we found that's pretty effective is to hit them from every angle: It's about saving money; it's about doing the right thing for our community and showing our involvement with our community on the social aspects of it; or it is about saving our children; or it's about the emotional, the economic, every business level that you can imagine. That's probably the most effective way.

I think the other thing is not to try to eat the elephant all at once, but to take a tusk or something. Just take one or two things and prove your concept. If you have an idea, you think you can save energy this way, take one thing and do that well and then prove it. Use a metric and prove it.

The other thing that's very powerful is this idea of social influence. It's very powerful in my five-year-old, of course, what her other friends are doing. And, surprisingly, we keep at it even as adults. And so this idea of social influence, you can apply that to individuals and having teams pit against each other and encourage each other to change their behavior.

But you can also think of it in terms of benchmarking and talking to your advisors or your boss or your CEO, whoever you have access to, and say, "You know what, I've benchmarked other organizations just like us and they've seen the following benefits. Wouldn't this be something that we should try? They have a one-upmanship on us."

I can't tell you how many times I'm asked for benchmarking in the design field—"Well, are they also adopting alternative work? Are you also doing some sort of cool car pooling? Well, hmmm, maybe we should also investigate that."

So it's all about making sure that you're not behind.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Right.**

**You mentioned greeniacs, which is one of your terms for different personalities that you might encounter in a workplace environment. I'm wondering if you can go through the others, because when I read that section of the book I found myself nodding, nodding, nodding. So if you could share with the audience what those are.**

**LEIGH STRINGER: Sure.**

I do a lot of facilitations of groups and organizations about greening their building or greening their space or greening their organization in a case of light. It never fails that four different types of people show up—not to typecast, but to stereotype. Why not? Everybody else is doing it. It just seems like one of four different groups will show up.

The first group, as you mentioned, is greeniacs. If you look that up on the [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com), it's this term in use of late that very much has to do with people who have drunk the Kool-Aid. They know that the environment is important to them and they have done all this research. They've got solar backpacks. They already have the carbon footprint app on their iPhone. They have geothermal in their backyard.

What's great about this group—they're slightly annoying, I will say (I'm one of them so I can say that). These guys are know-it-alls—they have done all the research. So if you're an organization and you want to know what a local solar panel provider is, they can tell you, "Absolutely, here are five different companies. I already have done the research." So it's a great group to rely on.

The second group I call business environmentalists. This group cares about the environment but they particularly are interested if you can tell them it can save them money and it affects business and improves business or increases market share—"Hey, if we do a green product, that's really going to sell," or whatever. This group just eats it up. They have the ear of the [C-suite](#) often because they are very practical and pragmatic about the whole thing, which is great.

The third group is the largest group by far. I don't care what organization you're in, it is a significant portion of corporate America in particular. These are the green couch potatoes.

Now, the green couch potatoes are people that if there happens to be a recycling bin right at their desk and in fact there was no other bin at their desk, they might actually dump the paper into the recycle bin. Or if they're on a campus and the shuttle bus comes by and they walk out the door and the shuttle bus is exactly where they need it to be, they would get in a shuttle bus and go and use that versus their single-occupancy vehicle to go from building A to building B. This is a group that needs things to be really convenient to them.

What is really important about this group is that, number one, they are the largest group by far, over 50 percent, certainly 80 percent in most organizations. We have to have them engaged. We have to make it so super-simple for any of these folks to do the right thing without even thinking about it.

Because we need them for all the green metrics. We need them to throw their waste out so we meet our waste metrics, and to basically reduce the amount of materials they buy or use because we need to reduce our raw material use, and energy of course. So all these folks are really important.

So I've become obsessed around just how people work and human behavior because it's that subconscious that we have to affect in our buildings and in our policies and all kinds of things.

The last group are what I call skeptics. They fall into a couple of categories. There are people who believe that the environment is not in trouble, and that is fine. They are absolutely entitled to their opinion. The important thing about understanding that group and having that group involved in a focus group is that this is a group who will punch holes in everything you do. If you don't have an answer back to them that's logical and thought out and meets a business need, it will fall apart in a heartbeat.

The closet skeptics are the people that nod their heads, "Yes, good idea," and walk out and never think about what you're talking about again, don't even remember it. They just have other things on their plate.

I think the thing about skeptics too, and we alluded to this a little bit earlier, is that there are other things out there that companies are worried about and that people are worried about. They're worried about their job. They're worried about keeping the company in business. They're worried about will their team member next to them be sitting there tomorrow.

So with this kind of climate, the environment is fighting with a lot of other pretty urgent and pressing issues—security, you name it; there are all kinds of issues of course that are on our minds. So we have to also weave into the story how the environment feeds into all these other things and feeds into a bigger story about a more sustainable business plan in the mega sense. That's what makes things stick.

**JULIA KENNEDY: I'm going to take on the role of maybe a super-couch potato or a skeptic just to ask you a couple of questions about some of your proposals in the book, which I'm sure you've gotten as you're working with these focus groups.**

**One is you talk a lot about telecommuting as an alternative, make businesses able to shrink their space that they have to have and to reduce the amount of commuting that employees are doing. I'm curious. If a skeptic came to you and said, "I have this employee that I'm really reluctant to supervise from afar if they're going to telecommute"—I think that's a common concern with telecommuting—how do you respond to that kind of skepticism?**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** You have just described one of the most common pushbacks that we get around telecommuting and alternative work in general. This is a lot of what I'm involved in lately, is creating alternative workplace strategies for folks and helping them come up with a plan like this.

The big issue with working remotely or managing a team remotely is trust. Trust has to do with a manager being able to trust their employees to basically do their work, do it in a timely fashion.

The other issue, which is closely related to this one, is that deliverables are measurable. The product or the service or whatever is being provided as part of this company, that you can see something measurable and that you don't have to manage by seeing somebody. You have to manage by product—some sort of outcome.

The problem, I think, with a lot of organizations is they have been managing by sight for so long that it's difficult to pull apart "what I see my employees doing and then what they're delivering for me and the quality of that."

And a lot of industries too, the way that they train their young people is by saying that nothing beats overhearing a conversation on your team next-door from somebody more senior than you, and that mentorship is crucial.

So I think when we go through and profile, say, a workforce and a worker in an organization and say, "Are you a candidate for working remotely, even for a day a week, but certainly on a full-time scenario?" we really sit down and look at what they're doing, how long they've been with an organization, how senior they are, how motivated they are—you know, it's their personality as much as anything else—how trustworthy they are and how much their manager feels like they can trust them. It's very much a case-by-case basis in many instances.

But we've helped companies develop policies around this so they're very clear, because I think at a certain point

it's an entitlement—people say, "Oh, you know, if I'm working for a company and so many people telework, I should telework too." That's not necessarily the case. Everybody is in a different situation.

I will tell you that organizations that have figured this out, that have put the microscope on it and figured out how they can measure towards different sorts of deliverables and metrics and that they can trust their workforce a little bit differently, train managers—I spend a lot of time training good managers on how to do this—they can see unbelievable results.

One pharmaceutical company I'm working with now has moved towards a work-anywhere kind of environment, and some work at home as well. They're down to 30 square feet assigned per person as opposed to the typical 150-square-foot-per-person office. So dramatic real estate savings.

It does take a lot of work. There's not a direct correlation where you say, "Okay, well, we'll chop a third of our workforce off and encourage them to work from home and support their managers, blah, blah, blah, and then we'll save all this real estate and square footage. Isn't that wonderful?"

But it turns out that there are additional costs. You've got to train folks. You've got to set people up at home, my goodness, give them a really good dial-in that they can get to the network, and they have a phone that they can easily transfer back and forth.

The truth of the matter is that we're all working all the time—in the grocery line; in bed, there are a large number of people who use their PDAs [[Personal Digital Assistant](#)] in bed, including—

**JULIA KENNEDY: Insomniacs.**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** Including my husband.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Right.**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** Which is causing all kinds of other social problems. And actually it's quite dangerous in many situations—in the car and the like.

But I think that this ability to work anywhere—I'm in a consulting group, so a lot of us are on the road and moving around all the time. Email volume is the way we kind of measure it. Or can I get to somebody if I need to reach them, and are they responsive, and do they have the tools they need to get me what I need when I need it?

It's surprising how things are changing. Technology is enabling us to do this more and more and more every year.

**JULIA KENNEDY: There are a lot of skeptics that are in upper-level management. You've already talked about it a little bit, but I'm curious how far you think that employees can really effect change within an organization when they don't necessarily have buy-in from the top down.**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** If you happen to find yourself in an organization with a C-suite or executives who have their eyes on other balls besides the environmental ball and are really thinking that it's a nuisance or it's in the way of getting real business done, I think the best way to come about it is with a business case. That business case may be very simple.

There's a great example in the book. I wrote about this one guy at Google. I recognize Google is a very deep-green company, but this example would apply anywhere. This guy at Google was basically pretty frustrated because he saw bottled water in every location. I don't know if you know anything about Google, but they have these fabulous food and beverage stations that keep you there for long hours. People always talk about the "Google 15"—I guess you gain 15 pounds when you first start there. But they have all these bottled water stations, and it's everywhere.

He said, "This isn't right. We're a green company. This shouldn't be how we should go about it."

So he calculated how much money they spent on bottled water every year and did a calculation on how much they might actually need to spend for glassware or filtered water stations, things like that, as an alternative. He came up with millions of dollars of savings. I can't remember the number exactly—it's in the book—but it's a very large number.

He got on a Google dock and he emailed it around and said, "Let's start a petition and here's the business case." So between a combination of a huge number, a very large percentage of people who had signed his petition to say "we should do this," and the fact that he was saving a significant amount of money every year on bottled water, it was a no-brainer. It didn't hurt Google, of course, that that was also part of the culture of the organization, to act

green, to be green. But I think that it's such an easy example of the grassroots and how you can make a difference.

I think, at the end of the day, be proactive. If you're somebody in an organization that you know—I mean don't be preachy, don't be too much of a greedy kind of person—but be practical and do some research and find out what other companies are doing just like yours, and figure out how to really save money either on the cost side or to make money on the pro side, on the business side. I think that is really hard to fight.

It also shows your ingenuity. Be careful if you have too many of these ideas, because you'll probably be put on some sort of sustainability committee or, heaven forbid, assigned it as a full-time role.

It is interesting, actually, organizationally. We talk to a lot of companies about who were the green people in their organization who were assigned and had some sort of accountability across the organization. It's a young group of people, because they care, because they've done research, because it's part of their belief system, and they have taken it on themselves to do things like this and to actually make change happen.

**JULIA KENNEDY: How within an organization should the green committee or sustainability committee work? Should it be a department? Should it be people spread throughout different departments? What do you recommend?**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** I'm actually doing this for an organization right now, an insurance company. We're starting this from the real estate department, but we're trying to figure out how to save carbon globally with this organization. In order to tackle those big issues, you've got to tackle it at every level.

What we're starting to do as a process is to interview different people in different departments across the organization—within the R&D department or the actuarial department, the legal department, the HR, the communications, you name it—and find out what they're doing and what they're measuring, what sort of progress they've made, how they're reporting various metrics.

And then getting everyone together, because I think in most organizations it's a very dispersed group of greeniacs or folks focused on these issues and they're not thinking holistically because they are so focused on their department and making things happen in their department.

There's this kind of interesting phenomenon that happens when you get all these people together: They start to cross over and they start to see how "Gosh, this procurement policy I'm writing here might actually greatly affect the procurement on the building side. And, wow, I didn't even think about how all these things were connected and what sort of impact it might have."

I think all these things pulled together are much better and much more holistic. I think organizations that pull them together are doing a great job.

That's not always possible and resources are scarce these days. If you just have your department or your team to work with, that's absolutely acceptable. But to the extent that you can tie maybe even young people in the organization together who are from different departments, who might be willing to volunteer on their own time to do some events or some interesting social mission, say for example in the community, that's a great way even at a level within the organization. Even if it's not the top, it's a level to weave people together and get them talking.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Now, you work for HOK, which is a really large architectural firm. Why are they interested in having you look at human behavior and that aspect of sustainable workplaces?**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** Well, the great thing about HOK is that if you are interested in a topic, you are encouraged to pursue it deeply. I work for a group within this architectural firm that focuses on strategic consulting, for lack of a better word, like workplace consulting and real estate portfolio assessments, where we talk to organizations at a high level about where they should be building and why, and also really understanding how people work and how to support that in physical environments, as well as leveraging technology and other stuff.

Through this I've been very interested in understanding the sustainable component as well, because a number of architects across our practice have been really deeply interested in green building. There's all kinds of partnerships with the [Biomimicry Guild](#), which is very involved with biology and what's next on the frontier for super-green materials and ways of thinking about building. Very cool stuff.

So I think there has been this kind of convergence of a number of, I'll say for lack of a better word, specialized sustainable thinkers across our practice. I think we realize, with almost no thought at all, that all these things are starting to weave together, and the stories that we can tell that tie not only our buildings to deep-green thinking on the biology side and engineering side—weaving that story together is wonderful—but really understanding that

buildings are for people and that leveraging the behavior of our people and our buildings is crucial.

So obviously, we've got these beautiful buildings, and if on day two they aren't used well and used by the occupants of those buildings in a way that sustains them and sustains the environmental metrics that we've set up and set out to do, then we really aren't going to see the results and the return that we hope.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Why are you personally passionate about these issues and why did you become one of those sustainability experts within your company?**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** I went with my husband to see a movie by [Al Gore](#), whom you might have heard of, [An Inconvenient Truth](#). My husband is very into politics. We had just gotten through—I say "we"; it was a family affair—an election. I'm not very into politics myself and was just OD'ed over it. So the last thing I wanted to do was see a movie by Al Gore. But we heard it was good.

I went. The part in the movie where Al Gore gets on that stepladder or some sort of cherrypicker, and there's a huge PowerPoint presentation in the background, and he's talking about I think it was carbon footprint or something, some incredible metric about increased use of energy across the globe—probably it was carbon—and the huge exponential growth of the stuff. And then, of course, he gets on the cherrypicker and follows it up and up and up. It was just very dramatically done, of course.

But I would say that it was at that point I thought "Oh my God, really, seriously?" I don't know. Everybody has their different—

**JULIA KENNEDY: It was just recently for you.**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** It was. I was pregnant with our first child. I walked outside and I was practically in tears thinking "Wow, I do not want this to happen to her and I don't want to leave this place." Thinking about it now I'm tearing up. I don't normally do that.

But it does make me think, because I've just had another child, so it's another momentous occasion, thinking about their lives. I just can't imagine that I would live my life without trying to do something about it.

**JULIA KENNEDY: I want to ask what do you see for the future. Do you see this as sort of an inevitable change, that people are going to get on the bandwagon and it's going to happen and it's just a matter of how we do it? Or where do you see, both personally and at work, these kinds of green practices going? How can we effect their implementation?**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** I think you've phrased it well or framed it well. We can either be a part of the solution or we can just let things happen.

The "just letting things happen" scenario is not so happy. Gas prices are going to go up. I know they fluctuate and I know they've gone down and up. But just conceptually there's a nonrenewable resource that we're heavily dependent on. We're debatably creating all kinds of wars on it. It's not so good.

On the energy side, I think materials as well. You know, you just look at the amount of waste around the world and it's not so great.

So one future is we let it go and we just see what happens. There are fewer and fewer resources. There is more and more pricy gas. The haves have more, the have-nots have less. It's pretty nasty actually when you think it through.

I am optimistic. I do not think that is going to happen. I think that people are very smart and they'll figure this out. Whether they have an environmental cause behind their motivations or not, I think they'll realize it's just good business to be sustainable and they'll think about creating a business that doesn't have to depend on renewable resources and a business that solves problems, doesn't create new ones.

It's that innovative thinking, it's that out-of-the-box thinking, that you as a person and an organization can affect and can change by taking the way we do things and just flipping it and putting it on its head. However that works in your organization—if that's a brainstorming session, if that's using the rules of improv and the yes/and and yes/and and there's no bad idea kind of thing—whatever it takes to encourage us all to think a little differently about not only where we work but how we do it, who we do it with, and the outcomes we're trying to achieve in our business and in our daily lives.

I'm reading a book now about [The Happiness Project](#), which I really love, written by a local New Yorker. I'm only just now starting it. But I am drawn to this idea of happiness and of how do we create a place that's happier for

ourselves and for our children, is less stressful, doesn't keep us on the road all the time and working 24/7. What is the right place for us?

We should be selfish when we're thinking about being sustainable, right? It's not just about saving the Earth. It's about saving ourselves from a really scary work/life imbalance and keeping things real and grounded.

So my hope and my wish for anyone out there who wants to make a difference within their organization and become more green in their personal practice is that you just try it. You just give it a shot and try something different. Back to work, try something that you might not have tried in the past. Buy greener vegetables locally grown or something like that, and put it into your practice every day. And then really pay attention on what it does for your stress level and your happiness, because I think that it's all tied together.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Leigh Stringer, these are wonderful words of wisdom. Thanks so much for joining us on Just Business.**

**LEIGH STRINGER:** Thank you so much for having me.

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Architect and sustainability expert Leigh Stringer is convinced that LEED green buildings are only a piece of the puzzle when designing a sustainable office. She argues that a crucial component is human behavior.

Leigh Stringer is senior vice president and practice leader at HOK, a global architectural firm.

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