



Using Sustainability Archetypes to Build Efficient Strategy

In today's complex business environment, organizations face mounting pressure to advance sustainability goals amid political backlash, regulatory demands, and growing stakeholder scrutiny. To efficiently develop an organization strategy for sustainability, while navigating these challenges, it can be helpful to consider archetypes. These archetypes represent distinct organizational mindsets toward sustainability and understanding which one best fits a company is key to designing an efficient, impactful sustainability strategy.

Examples of archetypes include:

Box Checker:

Focused on meeting baseline expectations, this archetype treats sustainability as a compliance exercise. It avoids strategic integration and limits its actions to what is minimally required. While often seen as a laggard, the Box Checker can still play a useful role as a secondary archetype, allowing companies to prioritize what truly matters while maintaining basic expectations elsewhere.

- **A good example here could be represented by the need to report to the EU's CSRD with an exceptional number of metrics and double materiality.**

Brand & Reputation Driven:

These organizations use sustainability to enhance their image and public perception. This archetype aligns well with consumer-facing brands and those seeking to differentiate through values. Sustainability is deeply integrated into marketing and external communications, offering opportunities to create brand loyalty, attract talent, and enhance customer engagement.

- **We can appreciate how an upscale consumer or lifestyle brand may benefit from this message.**

Immediate Return Driven:

This type prioritizes sustainability projects that deliver direct financial returns. It appeals to leadership teams focused on performance metrics and short-term ROI. Companies under this archetype leverage sustainability to cut costs, improve efficiency, and increase profitability—making it a practical entry point for integrating sustainability into core business operations.

- **Think here about the initiative providing an opportunity for a new customer.**

Examples of archetypes include:

Impact & Purpose Focused:

Companies under this archetype are driven by values and mission. Sustainability is an extension of who they are. They may pursue bold initiatives even in the absence of immediate returns, focusing on social or environmental impact. This can inspire innovation and employee engagement, though it may require additional effort to align financial outcomes with values-driven actions.

- A foundation wanting to report to the community and team members would benefit from this strategy.

Innovation Driven:

These organizations use sustainability as a lever to drive transformation—developing new products, processes, and business models that address environmental and societal challenges. They treat sustainability as an engine for growth and disruption. While resource-intensive, this archetype can position a company at the forefront of its industry's evolution.

- A great example here would be an organization operating in a recycling market.

Risk Reduction Driven:

Sustainability here serves to mitigate legal, operational, and reputational risks. Companies embrace standards, improve supply chain transparency, and build resilience. This archetype is especially effective in heavily regulated industries or sectors with high exposure to ESG risks.

- Financial firms would be obvious organizations to incorporate this strategy.

Selecting and Applying the Right Archetype

Rather than attempting to be all things to all stakeholders, companies should identify one or two dominant archetypes that reflect their core business strategy, culture, and stakeholder expectations. Doing so helps clarify purpose, align leadership, and focus resources. For example, a manufacturer might adopt a Risk Reduction and Immediate Return blend, using sustainability to drive cost savings and regulatory compliance. A lifestyle brand may lean into Brand & Reputation with a secondary focus on Impact & Purpose.

Selecting the right archetype also shapes how companies define material issues, develop metrics, communicate externally, and engage internally. It enables them to prioritize high-impact initiatives and avoid wasteful, unfocused efforts. Ultimately, this clarity makes sustainability strategy more actionable, credible, and efficient, and transforms it from a burden into a business advantage.

SUSTAINABILITY ARCHETYPES

BOX CHECKER



BRAND & REPUTATION
DRIVEN

IMMEDIATE RETURN
DRIVEN



IMPACT & PURPOSE
FOCUSED

INNOVATION DRIVEN



RISK REDUCTION
DRIVEN

Greenway was introduced to these archetypes by sustainability consultants Steve Rochlin and Jeff Senne of Impact ROI and Sandbar Solutions with their recent report on Sustainability Strategy in 2025: Thriving in an Era of Impact and Backlash. These ideas make a lot of sense to us