

# MISSION ZERO™ — THE POWER OF A CHALLENGING VISION

The Endless Possibilities series



*Mission Zero:*  
our promise to eliminate  
any negative impact our company  
may have on the environment  
by the year 2020.

*“I have the mental image of a mountain to climb – a mountain that is taller than Everest, and infinitely more difficult to scale. The name of the mountain is sustainability. We are only on the lowest slopes of this mountain, but we know the way to the top.”*

When Interface CEO Ray Anderson addressed the company task force in 1994, they expected him to talk about compliance, review legal requirements, and discuss what the company needed to do to manage risk.

Instead, he stunned them by setting out his vision to make Interface “the first name in industrial ecology.” As this thinking matured, the vision grew into Mission Zero™ – to eliminate all negative impacts Interface has on the environment by 2020.

At the time, many people within and outside the company thought his idea was crazy, if not impossible. And yet 15 years down the line, the company is a recognised pioneer and leader in the sustainability field.

How did Ray Anderson convince his people that making **sustainability** a key part of the company strategy was the smart thing to do?

How did he inspire employees to come up with innovative solutions to **sustainability** challenges?

How has Interface maintained momentum and commitment to achieve this vision?



# THE CHALLENGE

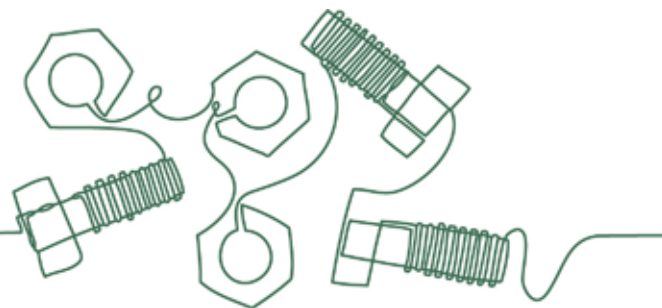
How does a company take on a challenging new mission convincingly? Not all company visions will be as radical as Interface's **Mission Zero**™ (see box), but here are just a few of the challenges that companies face when launching a new **sustainability** strategy:

- How does sustainable development fit with the core mission of a company?
  - What should be the focus of a company's sustainability strategy?
  - How can the company ensure its sustainability objectives are challenging enough to bring about real change, yet still achievable?
  - How can company leaders make the business case for sustainability and persuade the Board that it should be a key company objective?
  - How should it introduce the strategy to employees?
  - How can it ensure that its employees buy into and execute its strategy?
  - How does the company persuade its customers that sustainability is an advantage?
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# THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH

## Many **sustainability** strategies:

- Are not relevant to the company's core business
  - Fail to make a business case
  - Seek short-term easy wins, failing to look at the bigger picture
  - Are not consistently communicated or executed
  - Force employees to make a choice between sustainability and broader corporate goals, without allowing them to pursue both together
- A sustainability strategy, however well intentioned, is unlikely to succeed if it has not been carefully thought out and linked to the company's core business. Some of these examples may sound familiar. Sustainability strategies often fail because they:
- Are not consistently applied across the company's activities, e.g. the sustainability strategy is being communicated by the CEO, but the public affairs department is lobbying against a key element of it
  - Focus on efficiency improvements rather than transformation through disruptive innovations
  - Are not challenging enough, e.g. based on short-term goals that are easy to achieve with existing technology
  - Don't focus on the most significant impacts in the product life cycle, e.g. targeting emissions reductions from factories when most of the product's carbon footprint is from its use once it has left the factory
  - Don't account for business growth when setting overall reduction targets (targeting normalised not absolute reductions), e.g. achieving the goal to reduce emissions by 10% per unit produced at the same time as overall emissions have doubled from business growth
  - Are not consistently committed to over time, e.g. one CEO champions sustainability, the next dismisses it
  - Are not communicated clearly to employees, who are therefore not engaged in achieving the strategy
  - Are over sold to the customer, making them suspicious of the company's 'green' or sustainability credentials
  - Are not connected to the core business, e.g. focusing on philanthropy rather than addressing the impacts the company's operations have on a local community



# INTERFACE'S EXPERIENCE

In 1994 Ray Anderson, Interface founder and then CEO, set out a powerful vision that challenged and inspired our employees to achieve great results. His recommendation is to: “Hold up a vision that’s so outrageous it takes your breath away. That’s how you unleash the creativity of an organisation.”

He did exactly that with **Mission Zero™**, his vision for Interface. As we work to implement **Mission Zero™**, we have discovered a number of strengths which we think have contributed to the traction it has gained in the company.

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# GET GROWING WITH SUSTAINABILITY

**Sustainability** is more than an environmental philosophy. It's a platform to drive growth, build value and stay ahead of competition.

Embracing **sustainability** opens up energising possibilities for your organisation. You'll gain fresh insights into streamlining processes for greater efficiency, re-tooling products so they are most cost-effective and employee strategies that build on what is best for your operations, culture and mission. In short, **sustainability** makes great organisations even greater.



# SIX THINGS WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE POWER OF MISSION ZERO™:

## 1. Set an outrageously ambitious goal to inspire real change

The magnitude of Interface's sustainability vision is its unique strength. When it was announced in 1994, the vision was so radical that people embraced it and indulged the idea because the date for achieving the goal was 25 years away.

The Interface vision to have zero negative impact is extremely demanding, and some people say it was naïve to think it achievable. But it has inspired fundamental changes in the way people work at Interface because it is so challenging – whatever you do, you can always do a better and push a little further towards the goal. Employees are continually striving to come up with innovative processes that contribute to achieving the long-term vision, rather than making small adjustments to existing processes to meet less demanding targets.

At Interface we use this phrase 'there has to be a better way'. It applies to everything from a new manufacturing

process to a new product to contacting a customer. Rather than setting a limited target that can be achieved only by refining existing technologies or making current processes more efficient, Mission Zero™ demands real innovation. If we can't achieve our goal using the technology we have available to us, we are continually challenged to come up with new ways of doing things. This challenge has given us ground-breaking innovations such as:

- An adhesive-free way of installing carpet that reduces environmental impacts by 90%
- A new type of product, FlatWorks, that uses up to 50% less yarn
- A process that recycles nylon yarn (even though the inventors of nylon claimed it was impossible to recycle)

## 2. A CEO with credibility and passion to lead on sustainability

Visible leadership and commitment from the highest level of the company have played a vital part in demonstrating that Interface is serious about sustainability. Many CEOs try to lead a genuine change towards sustainability, but not all of them have the legitimacy or credibility to do it successfully.

Legitimacy and credibility can be established in different ways. For example, Ray was the founder of the company and himself a major shareholder. People had faith in him because he not only had a vested interest to do the best thing for the company but because Interface was 'his baby'. Second, Ray was in it for the long-term, whereas many CEOs in publicly held companies are in the role for

only three or four years. This makes it less credible for them to set goals convincingly for a quarter of a century in the future as Ray did.

Ray combines this credibility with a genuine passion for sustainability. Ray has relentlessly engaged employees on the subject at every opportunity, not just at sustainability-focused events, but during regular plant and sales meetings. He truly believes he must convince people 'one mind at a time'.

### 3. Address the elephant in the room

Interface's sustainability strategy gained credibility because it addresses our material issues, even the biggest challenges that aren't easy to solve. Mission Zero™ is split into seven key areas (or 'fronts'), each addressing a key sustainability challenge (see box). Rather than avoiding problem areas, our strategy focuses on finding solutions to some of our biggest sustainability challenges, such as:

- Our two main raw materials (yarn and bitumen) were both derived from oil, making their carbon footprint too high; we said we would 'cut the umbilical cord to oil'
- Our products contained potentially harmful chemicals for which there were no alternatives at that time; we said we would only have benign emissions (no toxic emissions from our products or our factories)
- Our customers were sending old carpet to landfill, a process that Interface had little control of; we said we would 'close the loop', 'engage stakeholders' and 'redesign commerce'

These are not easy to overcome, but we have already made significant progress (see Mission Zero™ box) by changing core elements of our business: in our products, our services, our manufacturing and distribution processes. We believe our challenging goals have helped push us to find solutions.

### 4. Let the business case speak for itself, right from the start

For Interface's strategy to succeed, we made sure our people could clearly see that sustainability could benefit the business, not cost more. At Interface, we began to see the results of our commitment very quickly. As we worked towards Mission Zero™, costs were going down not up. This dispelled a myth and exposed the false choice between the environment and the economy. It also helped to convince employees who were initially wary about whether sustainability could deliver value for the business. Making the business case speak for itself right from the start is essential to give the sustainability strategy credibility among potential cynics.

A wide range of initiatives across the company are helping to reduce waste and energy use, cutting costs at the same time. For example, our global QUEST programme, which encourages employees to identify and reduce waste across the business, has saved over \$405 million globally since 1995. And in Europe, shifting to lower-carbon modes of transport is cutting our delivery costs by an estimated €140,000 a year.

If QUEST focuses on incremental improvement (using, for example, Six Sigma, waste management programmes and focusing on lean manufacturing), our Ecosense programme was about targets step change and

transformative disruptions. Ecosense allows different factories to benchmark, establish goals, track and report the progress. Since its inception, the programme has continuously evolved with new opportunities and new metrics as we have come to understand what it truly takes to become a sustainable company, and as we have become better at measuring our progress.

But the business case is not just about cutting costs. When we began our journey in the mid-1990s, sustainability was a relatively unknown concept. Since then, the market has changed. Sustainability and climate change are hot topics. Many companies or organisations want to show they are reducing their own environmental impacts. Our customers increasingly want to buy more sustainable products for example with high recycled content and a low carbon footprint. They want their buildings to meet sustainability standards like LEED or BREEAM, and they ask us to help. For some of our key customers, sustainability is the number one criteria. To become the sole carpet supplier for government buildings in one country, for example, 60% of the points were awarded based on sustainability criteria.



## 5. Make **Mission Zero™** personal, one mind at a time

At Interface, we target our communications and highlight different aspects of the Mission Zero™ challenge to ensure sustainability messages resonate with each of our employees in their particular role. We encourage dialogue with employees on sustainability issues, rather than depending on one-way communications, and encourage them to make suggestions. This helps motivate our people to be creative and come up with solutions to sustainability challenges, and they are rewarded for their efforts. Embedding the company sustainability strategy at all employee levels is the subject of another article from this series.

## 6. Use sustainability as a source of innovation

New technology and designs that help the business expand into new territories and product categories – and create a competitive edge in existing ones – demonstrate the value of sustainability as a source of innovation. By putting sustainability at the centre of everything we do, our vision has helped us come up with some ground-breaking innovations. Sustainable innovation is the subject of another article from this series.

# OUR TOP TIPS

- Set ambitious targets that inspire people
  - Have the courage to face up to tough challenges, don't just tell the positive stories
  - Link the sustainability strategy to the business case
  - Acknowledge the need to fundamentally redesign core products and processes for truly sustainable transformation
  - Create a culture of 'there is a better way'
  - Lead from the top with visible and sustained commitment from senior executives
  - Inform, engage and motivate employees to put the strategy into action
  - Use the ambitious sustainability strategy to achieve competitive advantage through innovation not just PR
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# INTERFACE & MISSION ZERO™



*Mission Zero:  
our promise to eliminate  
any negative impact our company  
may have on the environment  
by the year 2020.*

Interface is a worldwide leader in the manufacture of modular commercial flooring, producing the industry's largest and most diverse range of carpet tiles.

Interface founder and Chairman Ray Anderson pioneered corporate sustainability in 1994 by recognising that the way industry works is fundamentally unsustainable and had to change. It needed to stop having a destructive effect on the natural and social environment, and, instead, work to restore it.

Ray's epiphany revolutionised Interface's business strategy from that day forward. It later transformed into Mission Zero™: our goal to eliminate any negative impact we have on the environment by 2020. We've come a long way since then, but there's still a long way to go.

We liken the challenge of achieving Mission Zero™ to climbing a mountain higher than Everest. With this in mind, we have set out our path to scale 'Mount Sustainability' on seven ambitious fronts.

## The Seven Fronts: our goals and progress (at the end of 2009)

1. Eliminating waste – Eliminating all forms of waste in every area of business. Since 1996 there has been a 80% normalised reduction in waste sent to landfill.
2. Benign emissions – Eliminating toxic substances from products, vehicles and emissions. We have cut actual greenhouse gas emissions by 44% since 1996.
3. Renewable energy – Reducing our energy demands while substituting non-renewable sources with renewable ones like solar, wind and landfill gas. In Europe, all factories use 100% renewable electricity and 30% of our global energy comes from renewable sources.
4. Closing the loop – Redesigning processes and products so that all resources used can be recovered and reused, closing the technical or natural loop. 36% of total raw materials are recycled or bio-based materials.
5. Resource-efficient transportation – Transporting people and products efficiently to reduce waste and emissions. 99.7% of the products sold in Europe were manufactured in Europe.
6. Sensitising stakeholders – Creating a community within and around Interface that understands the functioning of natural systems and our impact on them.
7. Redesign commerce – Redesigning commerce to focus on the delivery of value instead of material.



# EXPERIENCE IT YOURSELF

Corporate clients, sustainability professionals and academic institutions visit our factories every year to experience the Interface culture of sustainability for themselves. Talking directly to our people and seeing our vision in action demonstrates how deeply embedded **Mission Zero™** is in the company.

That's why we set up **InterfaceRAISE**, a consulting service that helps organisations weave sustainability into the fabric of everything they do, accelerating their learning, while enhancing their value and fulfilling their mission. We run two-day in-house executive training workshops – called '**Cultural Immersion Programmes**' – at our factories. We also collaborate with universities and business schools to enable their students to participate through external presentations or in-house training.

With over 15 years of experience in applying sustainability in competitive markets, our international peer-to-peer consulting service offers a powerful sets of tools, insights and experts to deliver practical guidance at every stage of the sustainability journey. It's a new way for an organisation to plan, manage and excel; raising aspirations while respecting the needs of society and the environment. With **InterfaceRAISE**, the possibilities are endless and the benefits real.

[www.interfaceraise.com](http://www.interfaceraise.com)



## WE KNOW THE TERRITORY

When entering into new territory, it's good to have an experienced guide. With more than 15 years of experience putting **sustainability** theory into practice we've been there and got the t-shirt when it comes to **sustainability**. The **sustainability** journey never ends, and our world-class experts can help you pick up the right path for the organisation. Together we can avoid common pitfalls, identify a smart course to improve your bottom line and get your organisation exactly where you want it to go.