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Transforming Organizations from the Inside Out

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Corporate change agents for sustainability—Transforming organizations from the inside out

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Abstract

Sustainable development requires sustainability transformations of (so far unsustainable) companies. Sustainability transformations of companies do not happen by themselves but are the result of individuals and groups who purposefully act for sustainability. It is individual managers and employees within an organization—so-called “change agents for sustainability”—who play a vital role in advancing corporate sustainability, as they are responsible for starting initiatives, making decisions, and implementing measures. Recent contributions have started to address the transformational role of individual sustainability professionals and employees shaping decisions around social and environmental issues in organizations. An overview and conceptualization of what can be understood by change agents for sustainability, their roles, and interactions is however missing. This article therefore proposes a framework and typology of six archetypes of change agents for sustainability: their key competencies and roles in initiating, scaling, and sustaining change in and beyond organizational boundaries.

KEYWORDS

Ecological/Sustainability, Leaders/Leadership, Managers, Organizational

1 | INTRODUCTION

The pivotal role of companies in driving sustainability transformations of markets and society has been acknowledged widely in the sustainability management literature (Beckmann et al., 2020b; Hansen & Schaltegger, 2013; Loorbach & Wijsman, 2013; Schaltegger et al., 2023). To achieve sustainable development, companies must establish new business practices that allow them to operate in line with safe and just Earth system boundaries (Rockström et al., 2023) and, hence, contribute to meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Yet, many businesses face challenges in developing sustainable business practices and fully embracing corporate sustainability. Companies' slow progress raises questions about who may

initiate and enact the necessary organizational changes toward corporate sustainability, as these changes do not happen spontaneously (Schaltegger et al., 2016). While factors and motivators in companies' external environments may fuel and support organizational change toward corporate sustainability, “it is individuals [inside the company] who fundamentally determine whether and how far-reaching a company considers sustainability, or disregards it” (Buhr et al., 2023, p. 2; see also Gond & Moser, 2021; Prahalad, 2010).

Not surprisingly, in recent years, a growing amount of research has focused on the role and importance of individual managers and employees within companies in advancing corporate sustainability—whom we call corporate “change agents for sustainability” (CAS). The literature has embraced different conceptualizations of CAS that

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become salient when examining the terminology used to describe these individuals: from green CEOs to internal activists (in suits) and internal entrepreneurs (Hahn et al., 2024; Hübel, 2022), from heroes to green nerds. Overall, the literature on CAS is rather fragmented and we lack a systematic analysis and a comprehensive view of who they are and what they do. Moreover, the discussion does not explore the role of individuals acting for organizational change toward corporate sustainability: Only a few empirical studies have investigated the diverse interpretations of sustainability change held by various CAS in practice (van der Heijden et al., 2012). While some limit the analysis to CSR managers, others extend the perspective to including even external consultants (e.g., Gond et al., 2024). With this overview article and the special issue, we seek to move beyond using the notion of CAS as a catchphrase and propose that—although CAS can unfold their activities at all levels and places in an organization (Acquier et al., 2011)—not every actor dealing with sustainability in an organization can be considered a CAS. Our point of departure is that to determine whether and why an individual can act as a CAS, we must reflect on what the sustainability transformation of organizations entails, as well as the opportunities, expectations, and potential barriers that different individuals face in their roles as (potential) CAS. Based on distinctive roles, we propose six archetypes of CAS and develop a framework to discuss their contribution potential for sustainability transformations.

This special issue aims to extend and deepen the burgeoning scholarly debate on CAS (e.g., Battilana et al., 2009; Birollo et al., 2021; Boiral et al., 2014; Buhr et al., 2023; Caldwell, 2003; Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Daudigeos, 2013; Girschik, 2020a; Lindgreen et al., 2011; Westley et al., 2013). We have solicited contributions that share further light into who CAS are, what they do, and how they impact corporate sustainability. This introduction discusses who corporate change agents are—or ought to be—the potential challenges that CAS face, and, finally, what we know and do not know about their change agency. The articles published as part of this special issue and their contributions to the debate are highlighted throughout this introduction. This overview article advances our understanding of CAS in three ways. First, we underline what is specific about CAS that makes them a valuable phenomenon to investigate. Second, we offer a comprehensive mapping of the occupational roles and functions that the notion of CAS encompasses. This is key to uniting research efforts that strive to understand how corporations may contribute to sustainability. Last, we distinguish six archetypes of CAS and develop a framework to list the types of activities different CAS may be involved in. This allows us to identify blindspots where further research is needed and to propose an agenda for future research on CAS.

2 | CORPORATE CHANGE AGENTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY—WHO ARE THEY?

Any helpful characterization of CAS that goes beyond calling every actor who is “somehow or somewhat” in contact with sustainability

issues, needs to answer what the purposes and challenges are that distinguish CAS from other actors. A high level of agreement exists among sustainability researchers that companies are key players to achieve sustainable development, that radical sustainability transformations of organizations are required to enable them to contribute effectively to sustainable development and that people, that is, actors, are key in driving this transformation. In light of these necessities, we propose that...

the notion of corporate “Change Agent for Sustainability” applies to any corporate member that deliberately pursues and effectively contributes to the necessary radical change of an organization towards achieving a society that functions within the safe and just operating space of Earth system boundaries, i.e., planetary boundaries, meeting the UN SDGs and beyond.

Our definition of CAS is grounded in the understanding that they are key actors who drive the necessary organizational change in their companies with an impact beyond organizational boundaries. Organizational change is for these actors therefore a means to create a fundamental sustainability transformation of the company and society.

Ideally, everybody in the organization would contribute to the sustainability transformation of the organization but, of course, not everybody can be expected to contribute to the same extent in the same way. While the level and type of sustainability engagement are partially influenced or even determined by official functions and roles, individuals have varying degrees of autonomy and choice. To understand who CAS are one must, thus, consider which beliefs, motivations, ambitions, goals, and actions drive individual change agency beyond officially ordered tasks relating to formal functions and roles.

Theoretically, CAS may embrace a spectrum of organizational change processes. These may vary from what could be called *change with sustainability implications*, that is incremental change dealing with a specific subtopic or aspect of sustainability, to what could be called *change for sustainability*, which includes more fundamental, radical changes of core business models and activities that contribute to sustainability transformations of markets and the economy toward a society that functions within the safe and just operating space of Earth system boundaries. For example, a sustainability manager trapped by short-term economic imperatives with no intent to change the company's practices radically and/or mainly concerned about reporting to please investors cannot be considered a CAS.

While keeping the fundamental character and radicality of the necessary change in mind, small wins are nevertheless necessary and inevitable (“every journey, no matter how long and difficult, starts with a first step”). In practice, immediate, radical change is unrealistic given path dependencies, organizational, societal, and individual inertia (e.g., York, 2009). Despite their radical ambitions, CAS thus often drive and realize piecemeal change as they attempt to change their company from within (Scully & Segal, 2002). Acknowledging

the difficulties of achieving a balance between the necessity of fast radical transitions and the inevitability of incremental intermediate steps, a key aspect of our definition of CAS is that they pursue and apply goals, beliefs, reference points, abilities, and measures for the purpose of companies' fundamental, radical change in order to contribute effectively to sustainability transformations of markets and society.

In line with the perspective that participation is a key element of sustainable development (e.g., as proposed in 1992 in the UN Rio Declaration and 2015 with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 17, UN 2015), companies' sustainability transformations cannot rest on top management decisions alone and have to be achieved in a participatory way. A conceptualization of change agency for sustainability should therefore consider change that occurs top-down as well as bottom-up.

Building on the above considerations to take sustainability seriously implies that corporate change agents for sustainability are characterized by.

- a. *deliberately pursuing (more rather than less) radical organizational change for sustainability;*
- b. *strong beliefs and shared values* that sustainability is a key purposeful goal that needs to be achieved with the highest priority;
- c. *addressing impact scopes beyond organizational boundaries*, including markets, consumption patterns, and lifestyles, to enable humankind to achieve the UN SDGs and stay within the Earth system boundaries;
- d. *applying evaluation criteria and performance measures* that address the necessary sustainability progress beyond organizational boundaries; and
- e. *combining a broad variety of competencies and skills* that enable them to be effective in their pursuit of creating change for sustainability.

This rather general characterization of CAS emphasizes certain key differences that distinguish CAS from other actors who face or deal with sustainability issues. However, how do these characteristics influence the effectiveness of CAS to achieve the necessary organizational change that is required for organizations to fully embrace sustainability? Arguably, whether or not corporate CAS can effectively initiate, drive, and execute the necessary organizational changes that make their business sustainable depends on their position and function within the organization. For example, while corporate CAS in leadership positions may have the necessary power to decide upon organizational change toward sustainability, CAS in lower-level hierarchical positions may have more of the necessary knowledge to design and implement change toward sustainability. Hence, while individually neither might be effective in their efforts, they can be very effective in collaboration. Following our general characterization of CAS, the next section clarifies various archetypes of CAS along the different positions and functions they may have within an organization, to determine more specifically what (may) constitute their change agency.

3 | ARCHETYPES OF CORPORATE CHANGE AGENTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Following the ideal general conceptualization of a CAS, we turn our view toward the question: "Who may act as corporate Change Agents for Sustainability?" To acknowledge differences between CAS we consider archetypes of CAS as recurrent patterns in organizations and an "intermediate abstraction" (Oberlack et al., 2019, p. 1; see also Sietz et al., 2019) to sharpen our understanding of the roles and contributions of different CAS. Defining archetypes of CAS serves here to typologize, to recognize patterns and to analyze functions, roles, and interactions between different CAS aiming to transform an organization toward sustainability.

In line with well-established models of organizational design (Mintzberg, 1979), we build on three analytical dimensions to distinguish different archetypes of corporate agents: (1) Is sustainability transformation a formalized/explicit or informal/implicit part of their roles? (2) Do the CAS belong to the operational line or the functional staff? (3) Where are they located in the organizational hierarchy (from top to rank & file)? The following section details these three analytical dimensions and proposes a typology of CAS.

Sustainability-oriented actors can have more or less explicit and formalized roles in an organization, which go along with certain expectations (Thomsen et al., 2024). Similar to Laasch and Conaway (2015) who distinguish between ethics managers and ethical managers, change agents for sustainability can first be distinguished between sustainability managers and sustainable managers (Beckmann et al., 2020a). Following this basic distinction, sustainability managers hold a distinct role with the explicit duty of overseeing sustainability matters for the organization and beyond. The latter, sustainable managers, adopt sustainable practices in handling their specific business functions, such as sustainable procurement. Sustainability managers are key to support sustainable managers with their specialized expertise while sustainable managers are key to effectively implement sustainability in the organization. It is worth noting that these explicit roles can be further differentiated based on their organizational placement and the specificity of their functions.

Indeed, following Mintzberg, we propose to distinguish between functional and operational managers. CAS may be found among sustainability managers whose main function is to foster change toward sustainability as well as among operational managers who may embrace a sustainability agenda on top of other operational functions. In the same vein, a member of the C-suite with a sustainability mandate will certainly not have the same possibilities of action as a rank and file sustainability activist.

Taking the different types of roles and degrees of formalization of sustainability responsibilities and their position in the hierarchical layers into account, we propose the following six archetypes of CAS (Figure 1):

1. *Strategic CAS can be part of the strategic apex* when executives in the higher echelons of a company are zealous about sustainability. Such CAS include but are certainly not limited to

Chief Sustainability Officers or Vice Presidents Sustainability mandated with top-down transformation duties (Sturdivant, 1979; Reynolds et al., 2018). Most recently, CEOs of leading global companies have called for the repurposing of business for the greater good in society (Harrison et al., 2020). Indeed, many companies have in the meanwhile made commitments to change, for example by formulating goals around reaching “CO₂ neutrality.” Moreover, many CEOs have abandoned their “apolitical” paradigm and instead act as “CEO activists” by taking a stance on socio-political issues (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

While often aspirational, such commitments from the very top of the organization can reorient a company toward fundamental sustainability transformations. For example, CAS in the company's higher echelons have the decision-making power to realign strategic priorities and incentives with sustainability objectives, thereby setting a new direction and providing resources for change that is decisive for radical transformations of the organization. However, despite salient commitments, most companies have made remarkably little progress on their sustainability transformation and pursued their societal purposes superficially if at all (Davis, 2021). This “implementation gap” (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013) is less of a problem for SMEs. In contrast to the CEOs of bigger companies, the founders and owners of SMEs maintain a stronger influence throughout their organization and the smaller size of their company makes it significantly easier and less costly to implement change throughout (Spence, 1999; Wickert et al., 2016). In particular when women hold leadership positions in SMEs, they can be powerful drivers of change (Dománska et al., 2024).

2. *Internal support CAS as part of the internal support structure* can be explicit sustainability managers in a specialized function in the firm (Beckmann et al., 2020a). Most visible CAS are formalized sustainability managers who have an official job description in a dedicated sustainability or corporate responsibility department

(Beckmann et al., 2020b; Schaltegger et al., 2015). Positioned in shared service units, explicit sustainability managers are mostly not involved in the daily routine of value-creation processes. Yet they have a content-driven leadership role in the whole organization as they coordinate sustainability inside the organization and often are the contact face with stakeholders outside the organization (Girschik, 2020a). They usually hold the mandate and responsibility for sustainability reporting (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010) and undertake the major share of external communication around the company's social and environmental sustainability (Schoeneborn & Girschik, 2021; Trittin-Ulbrich, 2022).

Inside the organization, explicit sustainability managers are responsible for strategic, coordination, communication, and integration functions for the whole organization or strategic business units. They have an internal cross-functional role to coordinate and support actors and activities of different departments to ensure alignment with the sustainability strategy (Schaltegger et al., 2015). Considering organizations as knowledge systems that require learning about new information, one important role and function of CAS thus is to initiate and facilitate learning processes, such as by organizing internal training, and information campaigns (Laasch et al., 2020). These roles are often occupied by people who find meaning in negotiating the sustainability agenda in their attempts to drive change (Mittra & Buzzanell, 2017). Insofar as sustainability positions offer promising career advancement, however, these positions often tend to attract people who are rather self-interested (Pelster & Schaltegger, 2022). It is thus important to note that while many CAS are found in explicit sustainability management positions, not all explicit sustainability managers act as CAS.

CAS in explicit sustainability management roles are well-studied as a burgeoning body of literature has adopted a micro-level perspective. Several contributions have highlighted that despite their explicit sustainability mandate, these CAS face a legitimacy deficit and struggle to be taken seriously

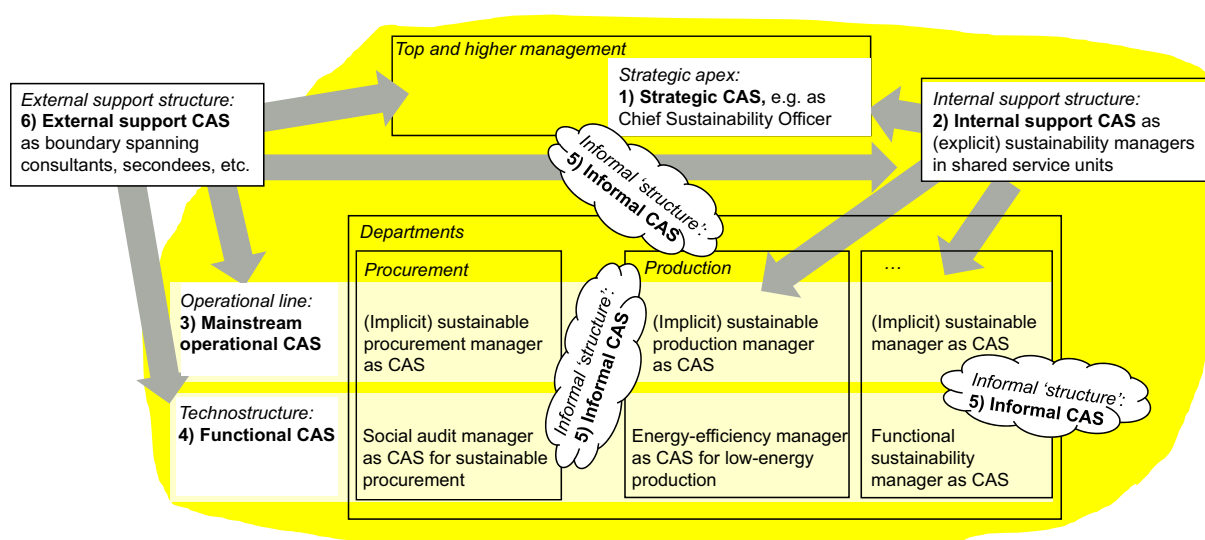


FIGURE 1 Archetypes of corporate change agents for sustainability.

in their company (Wright et al., 2012). Indeed, many studies have shown that sustainability managers struggle to reconcile business and sustainability goals (Dahlmann & Grosvold, 2017). In attempts to foster their legitimacy and gain access to and support of the strategic apex, these CAS will often use business lingo (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Risi & Wickert, 2017) and often draw on broader sustainability discourses in society to promote sustainability within their companies (Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). Despite their efforts, however, their positions in the company often limit sustainability managers in their ability to effectuate organizational change (Wright et al., 2012; Wright & Nyberg, 2012).

3. *Mainstream operational CAS as part of the mainstream operational line* in management roles across the firm (Beckmann et al. [2020a] call them “sustainable managers” in the operational line functions, differentiating them from the above mentioned “sustainability managers” as part of the internal support structure). Sustainability transformations of organizations cannot be realized by only relying on explicit sustainability managers in shared service units and business functions. Integrating sustainability decisions in daily practice requires that managers and employees with mainstream business functions and roles act sustainably, too. The literature has recently shown that middle line managers play an important role in that matter (Birolo et al., 2021). Without engaged sustainable mainstream managers in product development, procurement, production, logistics, sales, accounting, etc. no organization will succeed with a fundamental sustainability transformation. Such actors can be both initiators and mission-drivers of effective implementation of sustainability projects and measures as well as being guided and driven by central explicit and functional implicit sustainability managers (Hahn et al., 2024).

With most companies operating globally, these CAS are located in diverse local contexts. One key task of CAS positioned outside headquarters is therefore the local implementation of global policy (Burrill et al., 2020), which more often than not requires adaptation to local conditions, perhaps especially so in developing countries (Jamali, 2010). Studies have shown that local subsidiaries may re-negotiate the meanings of a company's global policy and re-interpret them in ways that better fit local actors and practices (Girschik, 2020b; Gutierrez-Huerter et al., 2020). In so doing, CAS can develop new ideas and practices that can, in turn, be picked up by CAS at headquarters and inspire change throughout the company (Girschik, 2020a).

4. *Functional CAS as part of the technostructure*: functional managers with dedicated sustainability responsibility. With a focus on implementation, CAS who act as functional managers with dedicated sustainability responsibility are actors whose management decisions have a rather direct impact on sustainability performance of the organization. Specialized functional managers integrate sustainability as implicit sustainability managers into a specific business function (e.g., production managers responsible

for environmental performance in manufacturing, procurement managers dealing with social audits of suppliers and sustainable supply chain management, etc.). Their role can be to challenge and improve regular operational processes and work. The number of R&D managers implementing life cycle assessment tools and processes, for example, has increased in large organizations (Nilsson-Lindén et al., 2018). Functional sustainability managers implement sustainability practices (e.g., a manager in the procurement department who organizes social audits in the supply chains of the company), and in an ideal case, coordinate and interact with explicit, central sustainability managers (e.g., concerning sustainability information that accounting and marketing managers compile for the explicit sustainability managers in the centrally shared service unit of the whole organization; e.g., Schaltegger et al., 2015).

5. *Informal CAS as “hidden” and informal actors* bridging the organization's borders: while formalized sustainability roles play an ever more important role in organizations (e.g., further specialized sustainability management roles such as sustainable supply chain managers, carbon accountants, etc.), and while sustainability is becoming an ever more integrated topic in mainstream functions (e.g., sustainability as part of the accounting role; e.g., Wenzig et al., 2023), informal processes also play a crucial role in organization development (Anderson & Bateman, 2000; Gond et al., 2024; Walley & Stubbs, 1999). Informal exchanges between actors can have a strong influence on the organization's culture, the motivation and commitment of individuals (Buhr et al., 2023) and therefore shape the level of ambition and speed of a sustainability transformation of an organization (Schaltegger et al., 2023). Key CAS are often neither explicit sustainability managers nor functional sustainable managers but rather act as “hidden” agents for sustainability who influence meetings and personal exchanges in an organization based on their personal beliefs, preferences, goals, and private social networks. Such actors include most notably but not exclusively social intrapreneurs, employee activists, and formally external actors with strong ties to organizational processes.

Informal CAS as social and sustainable intrapreneurs mostly act alone or in collectives to pursue *entrepreneurial efforts inside the firm* (Alt & Craig, 2016; Hemingway, 2005; Johnson & Schaltegger, 2020). Through internal venturing, they may attempt to initiate pilot projects or even establish a new business unit, thereby promoting innovative solutions to sustainability challenges. The solutions that social intrapreneurs promote are commercial, that is, they have the potential to generate profits, which renders them suitable for integration into a company's overall strategy (Alt & Craig, 2016; Hahn et al., 2024).

Informal CAS as employee activists inside the company try to make sense of the developments (Hübel, 2022) as well as guide and *push for their company's sustainability transformation* (e.g., Girschik et al., 2022; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). In contrast to social intrapreneurs, employee activists are less concerned with commercial solutions but rather driven by their aspiration to push their company to do better, for example, by holding it accountable for unsustainable activities. Located throughout the

organization, they often promote organizational change from the bottom up (Brinkhurst et al., 2011). Because they promote change that breaks with business-as-usual, however, employee activists face substantial headwinds from both colleagues and managers (DeCelles et al., 2019). Therefore, employee activism tends to be fragile and relies on the mobilization of powerful allies both inside and outside the company. Yet to be explored in research but observed in practice, some NGOs operating in the Anglo-Saxon context have seconded employees for periods of up to a year into large companies. These secondees act as employee activists, are fully embedded within the company for a limited period of time and given specific and stretching sustainability tasks.

6. *External support CAS who are formally located outside the company* (in Figure 1 outside of the dark shaded area that shows the organization's boundaries) have strong ties and access to organizational processes, sometimes over extended periods of time. *Consultants, advisors, secondees and strategic alliance partners*, for example, who are legally outside the organization, frequently play a crucial role in the change process and are integral to the company's value creation network (Gond & Brès, 2020; Gond et al., 2024; Hübel et al., 2022). Similarly, people who leave the company to found new sustainable organizations (e.g., providing sustainable supplies for the company), may through both their social connections inside the company and their commercial activities shape or partake in organizational change. This as boundary-spanning group of CAS can act both from "outside in" (Gond et al., 2024) by, for example, translating societal expectations, explaining new research results, introducing cutting-edge innovations of other organization, or challenging managers with external benchmarks. Due to their close connections, profound understanding of the company, or even their temporary positions within organizations, these CAS can also operate from an "inside-out" perspective. This involves articulating challenges in the change process, outlining prerequisites for facilitating sustainability transformations in industries, and providing generalized information to regulators, media, students, etc.

Our proposed six archetypes of CAS reflect the general idea that transforming a company from the inside out requires an "all-hands-on-deck" approach: sustainability needs to be supported by all management levels and departments and to be realized by all actors in an organization. Acknowledging the variety and spread of different CAS, we turn our attention to the question of what change or aspects of change different CAS address.

4 | WHAT DO CORPORATE CHANGE AGENTS DO?

When organizing and supporting sustainability transformations of the organization, CAS can help *initiate, scale, and establish a radical*

change of and through the organization (Schaltegger et al., 2023). Ideally, a CAS can support the whole transformation process through all phases, including the phasing-out of unsustainable practices and products. However, in practice, different actors may have strengths related to one or the other phase of such a transformation, or different actor arrangements may be most suitable. We can, as consequence, find different types of CAS in organizations that contribute differently to sustainability transformations.

While sustainability challenges may motivate many actors in an organization to suggest first ideas for possible solutions in meetings and informal discussions, initiation requires going beyond suggestions and instigating change by developing tangible projects, handing in concrete proposals to decision-makers, organizing pilot projects, maintaining stamina in implementation and by developing and implementing corrections to increase effectiveness and scale. One particular challenge that distinguishes transformation from small steps of change is to ensure that fundamental business areas are addressed (Schaltegger et al., 2023), including (i) innovation management to change the offers, supply chains, and production of the company, (ii) the core business and business model as the key rationale of the company, and (iii) relationship management with stakeholders as participation is key for sustainable development. Initiation of sustainability transformations therefore asks CAS to refrain from engaging in superficial and philanthropic activities that do not touch the core business rationale. CAS rather focus on initiating, scaling, and establishing fundamental, radical transformations toward sustainability.

Arguably, the role that different change agents for sustainability can have in different phases of change depends on their position within an organization (Lespinasse-Camargo et al., 2024). The proposed six different archetypes of CAS have different formal options and duties and different informal possibilities. While those situated in the upper echelon (strategic CAS) may have more power, middle managers (mainstream operational CAS), functional experts (functional CAS) or sustainability experts (internal and external supporting CAS) may be better able to convince their peers with their implementation expertise and of their personal conviction; which might work as an important change facilitator for organizational transformation toward sustainability. Nonetheless, extant research indicates various strategies and tactics that corporate change agents for sustainability draw on to facilitate sustainability transformation. These include strategies to engage other actors in the organization, for example, by building official "sustainability ambassador networks" and informal alliances as well as by convincing top management and external stakeholders (e.g., Daudigeos, 2013; Risi & Wickert, 2017).

Engaging in organizational sustainability transformations from the inside out furthermore requires change agents to acquire certain competencies (e.g., Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014; Laasch et al., 2020), engage in complex problem solving (Metcalf & Benn, 2013), creative imaginary work, as well as motivation (e.g., Windolph et al., 2014), passion, and persistence (e.g., Hörisch et al., 2019; Wright & Nyberg, 2012). The educational literature addresses the

competencies of sustainability managers both conceptually (Wiek et al., 2011) and empirically (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014; Wesselink et al., 2015).

Competencies answer the question “How do CAS become effective?” Given the fast-changing and vexed nature of sustainability requirements and challenges companies face, key competencies that have been highlighted in research are life-long learning for sustainable development and sustainability competencies (Cole & Snider, 2019), the ability to question assumptions (Wiek et al., 2011), creativity, entrepreneurial spirit (Hahn et al., 2024; Johnson & Schaltegger, 2020; Venn & Berg, 2013), and competencies (Hind et al., 2009; Lans et al., 2014), systems thinking, strategic and interpersonal competencies (e.g., Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014; Wesselink et al., 2015) as well as the implementation ability and “to get things done” in practice (e.g., Biberhofer et al., 2019).

In light of the different roles and functions CAS have in an organization and the need for a good network and interplay, both in the organization and beyond, the question is raised as to whether general competencies for CAS can be determined or whether necessary competencies need to be differentiated for different types of CAS. Based on the existing literature, Table 1 allocates key competencies to the six different archetypes of CAS distinguished above.

Strategic CAS sit as members of the strategic apex on the managing board or are responsible for the corporate sustainability department and have top or upper-echelon positions that require specific interpersonal, communication, and organizational skills in order to successfully fulfill their leadership position. A firm's commitment to sustainability is crucially dependent on the

commitment of organizational leaders to sustainability (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014; Wesselink et al., 2015). For example, Boiral et al. (2014) demonstrate in a study of leaders of SMEs that those organizations whose leaders can take on broader perspectives display the most environmental management practices, display systems thinking and demonstrate the ability to collaborate with stakeholders and be open to collaborative learning. Similarly, Metcalf and Benn (2013) argue that sustainability is a particularly complex topic that requires leaders to “link” their organizations to wider systems and act as interpreters between their organization and wider society. Domanska et al. (2024) investigate the key role of women in leading SMEs toward sustainability. Lueneburger and Goleman (2010) further suggest that organizational change processes toward sustainability require different leadership competencies in different stages within the change process. While in the early stages of change toward sustainability, the ability to communicate a clear vision is important, in later stages, commercial awareness and the ability to define and meet commercial targets become crucial. Finally, a strategic orientation is key, so that CEOs can help their organizations to anticipate and respond to long-term sustainability trends.

Internal support CAS are key actors (Lespinasse-Camargo et al., 2024; Thomsen et al., 2024) in developing sustainability reports and stakeholder dialogues inside and outside the organization. Often located in dedicated sustainability departments with little budget and limited hierarchical power, sustainability professionals particularly require the competencies to convince other organizational members to embrace sustainability. Competencies of these CAS therefore must feed into their ability to “sell” the topic of

TABLE 1 Key competencies of the six different archetypes of change agents for sustainability.

Archetype of change agent for sustainability	Examples of key competencies	Exemplary references to existing literature
1 <i>Strategic CAS as part of strategic apex:</i> Chief sustainability officer, vice president sustainability	Interpersonal, communication, organizational and leadership skills, commercial and strategic orientation, etc.	Laasch and Conaway (2015); Lindgreen et al. (2011); Painter-Morland (2011) With regard to personality traits: Pelster and Schaltegger (2022)
2 <i>Internal support CAS as part of the internal support structure</i> (e.g., in CSR department): Explicit sustainability managers in a specialized function in the firm	Interpersonal, communication, internal boundary-spanning transdisciplinary skills, etc.	Caniglia et al. (2021); Girschik (2020a); Hesselbarth and Schaltegger (2014); Kiesnere and Baumgartner (2019); Wesselink et al. (2015)
3 <i>Mainstream operational CAS as part of the mainstream operational line:</i> Sustainable managers in mainstream management roles	Role-specific disciplinary knowledge, leadership, and team skills, etc.	Anderson and Bateman (2000); Battilana et al. (2009); Beckmann et al. (2020a, 2020b)
4 <i>Functional CAS as part of the technostructure:</i> Functional managers with dedicated sustainability responsibility (e.g., carbon accountant in accounting dept.)	Role-specific disciplinary knowledge combined with sustainability knowledge, etc.	Jacobson et al. (2014); Schaltegger et al. (2015)
5 <i>Informal CAS as often hidden and informally operating actors:</i> Social and sustainability intrapreneurs; employee activists	Boundary-spanning, transdisciplinary skills, reframing skills, etc.	Girschik et al. (2022); Linnenluecke et al. (2009); Reihlen et al. (2022)
6 <i>External support CAR: Formally external to the company and part of the external boundary-spanning support structure:</i> Consultants, secondees, advisors, strategic alliance partners)	External boundary-spanning skills, reframing skills, sustainability knowledge about best practices, benchmarks, etc.	Gond and Brès (2020); Gond et al. (2024); Hübel et al. (2022)

sustainability to others. This means that they require communicative competencies, and interpersonal skills as well as boundary-spanning, inter-, and transdisciplinary competencies (Schaltegger et al., 2013).

Mainstream operational CAS are part of the mainstream operational line and can act as corporate CAS, especially if their responsibility falls within the Human Resources parts of operations: By allowing and offering employee training and engagement in sustainability, they can contribute to internal capacity building (Kramar, 2019). A challenge for operational CAS from the HR department is to resolve competing company interests, for example, between individual key performance indicators requiring short-term financial profit maximization and individual key performance indicators asking for contributions to social and environmental value creation. Such conflicts between different company-internal incentives may especially occur in companies without purposeful embedding of sustainability in the company's competitive and overall strategy.

Functional CAS are located in mainstream operational departments and managers with a dedicated sustainability responsibility. Through their deep specialized implementation expertise, they are important partners of the internal support CAS to apply functional competences for sustainability transformations. The functional managers stick to their expertise pocket and drive change in a specific company function or unit, spending their time and efforts on implementing parts of the corporate sustainability strategy. These CAS can also become blockers of change if forced into the sustainability role or purely taking on the sustainability component for career purposes (Pelster & Schaltegger, 2022).

An easily overlooked group are *informal CAS*. Various studies point toward key competencies and skills that allow "hidden" and informal actors to act as CAS. While their research does not directly focus on competencies among informal sustainability managers, Reihlen et al.'s (2022) study of how a sustainability initiative became a legitimate part of a corporate strategy indicates that hidden or informal CAS must be able to reframe the issue of sustainability vis-à-vis changing groups of internal and external audiences. Simultaneously, they must be attentive to important legitimating audiences whose approval they need to foster the sustainability implementation. This reveals that a key skill of these CAS is to understand the political climate within and around the organization and to forge alliances with powerful stakeholders (Girschik, 2020b).

External support CAS is group of actors who are formally external to the company but can be strongly involved in internal change processes such as consultants (Gond et al., 2024), secondees, advisors, and strategic alliance partners who operate at the intersection of the organization and its business environment. They can be seen as part of the external boundary-spanning support structure. Equipped with external boundary-spanning skills, reframing skills, and sustainability knowledge about best practices, they can influence internal actors considerably with regard to what strategies are developed and benchmarks are defined.

The categorization of archetypes of CAS and the identification of their required skills as identified in the literature so far provides a good basis to discuss the potential roles and contributions of

CAS in different phases of the sustainability transformation of an organization.

5 | FRAMEWORK OF KEY ACTIVITIES AND OUTLOOK

Sustainable development is a macro-level ecological and societal vision. Corporate CAS, while being individual actors in an organization, are therefore characterized by their strive to contribute to sustainable development beyond organizational boundaries. CAS go both beyond adopting guidelines and standards as well as beyond imitating best practices. Given that we are globally exceeding various Earth system boundaries and that the current speed of change is not sufficient to achieve the UN SDGs, a key challenge for CAS is to design and implement fundamental sustainability transformations of the core business and business models (Schaltegger et al., 2016).

Based on the above conceptualization of roles, archetypes, challenges, and approaches of CAS, we propose a framework delineating the key activities through which CAS can drive organizational change toward sustainability. The framework (Table 2) combines key phases of sustainability transformation—initiating, scaling, and sustaining—(e.g., Loorbach & Wijsman, 2013; Schaltegger et al., 2023) as discussed above with development objectives of successful organizational change as conceptualized with a non-hierarchical approach by Bartlett and Ghoshal (1994). We understand the latter to be a particularly useful framework to discuss how organizational change toward sustainability can be accomplished. This approach emphasizes that organizational change is particularly successful if an organization develops a collective understanding of its purpose, processes, and people. Combining these approaches, our framework conceptualizes CAS as individuals who initiate, scale, and sustain change in an organization with regard to purpose, processes, and people in order to contribute to sustainability transitions of markets, industry, and society.

The questions in the cells of the framework can guide further research to enhance our understanding of tasks and topics for the sustainability activities of CAS with regard to purposes, processes, and people in the organization. The framework unveils gaps that could inspire future research, particularly with regard to how CAS could be supported to become more effective.

One approach to support corporate change agency is *sustainability management education*, both at a general management level as well as at a specific, focused functional level. Executives and managing directors working for sustainability pioneers or leading corporate sustainability departments of large mainstream organizations require a comprehensive understanding of sustainability challenges, societal, and regulatory developments as well as strategic implications and answers to design a competitive strategy to grow and flourish through superior sustainability performance or, for mainstream companies, to guide a fundamental sustainability transformation of the whole organization. This body of research is so far mainly located in sustainability management journals but needs to

TABLE 2 Framework delineating key activities through which CAS can drive organizational change toward sustainability.

Development objectives of change	Key phases of sustainability transformation		
	<i>Initiating</i> change in and of the organization	<i>Scaling</i> and mainstreaming change in and of the organization	<i>Sustaining</i> change in and beyond the organization
<i>Developing organizational purpose:</i> Changing vision, imaginary, and corporate goals	How can and do CAS develop a sustainability vision for the organization? How do CAS "sell" key sustainability issues in the organization?, etc.	How do CAS embed the communication on the sustainability vision in onboarding and internal training programs? How can and do CAS convince larger group of managers and employees for sustainability?, etc.	How can and do CAS include and establish sustainability values in internal guidelines, contracts, code of conducts with suppliers, etc.?
<i>Developing organizational processes:</i> changing workflows, management tools, and systems	How can and do CAS introduce environmental and sustainability management systems in the organization?, etc.	How can and do CAS establish sustainability management systems in all subsidiaries and departments of the organization? How do they support different business functions in choosing and applying useful sustainability management tools?, etc.	How can and do CAS support the continuous application and establishment of social and environmental audits, management systems and tools? How do CAS help all business functions to further develop their sustainability management?, etc.
<i>Developing people in the organization:</i> changing individual values, competencies skills, and behaviors	How can and do CAS develop their own competencies? How do CAS support the development of sustainability skills of key decision makers in the organization?, etc.	How can and do CAS organize a successful roll-out of sustainability management training in all departments? How do CAS help developing sustainability skills of mainstream managers?, etc.	How can and do CAS establish regular sustainability trainings of staff and suppliers, keep quality circles motivated for continuous sustainability engagement, etc.?

become more established in educational journals and associated research debates.

The distinctions between different archetypes of CAS that we have introduced here reveals that more research is needed on formal and informal interactions of individual change agents with other actors in and outside the organization. Specifically, *professional networks dealing with focused sustainability topics* (e.g., sustainable facility management, sustainable product design, etc.) and consultants who can provide best practice examples and benchmarks for higher sustainability aspirations in the organization (e.g., Gond et al., 2024) play an important role in educating functional managers and shaping professional pressure at a functional level. In addition, *professional associations for sustainability management* are an important arena shaping the joint understanding of what professional sustainability management entails for explicit sustainability managers with regard to guidelines, standards, and methods applied in practice, etc. Interpreneurs, that is, entrepreneurial actors initiating, developing, and managing sustainability networks, are therefore important change agents outside the organization that can have a strong influence on sustainability processes in organizations. Important questions that have not been investigated in depth so far, include, how CAS build and maintain effective internal and external networks that drive sustainability transformations. How can sustainability agency be assessed, gaps be identified and the effectiveness be increased from a top and HR management perspective? More research is needed to understand these boundary-spanning processes, including the role of consultants and NGO collaborations, and how they can become more effective in fostering sustainability transformations.

The analysis and proposed framework of CAS highlight that transforming a company from the inside out requires an "all-hands-on-deck" approach that leverages various individuals' roles and capabilities. We still know relatively little about how individual characteristics shape the work of CAS. For example, while women can play a pivotal role in leading organizations toward sustainability in SMEs (e.g., Dománska et al., 2024), we still know little about the relevance and effects of gender throughout the organization and at decisive stages of sustainability transformation processes. A useful direction for further research is thus to explore how such individual characteristics enable and constrain change efforts and collaboration between CAS.

While CAS are important drivers of sustainable development, we should furthermore keep in mind that action for sustainable development is, and needs to be, driven by more actors in the economy and society, including regulators who can put pressure on established firms, founders of sustainability-oriented new firms and social businesses, societal stakeholders, etc. The interaction of corporate CAS with external stakeholders is therefore still an important area of future research.

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