

# Putting Recycling to Work

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A friend called me recently to ask about starting a recycling program at her workplace. I gave her some basic advice—setting up bins, identifying recyclables—but realized that recycling at work differs from recycling at home. After all, I can nag my children to recycle, but most employees won't nag their boss. I've known workplaces where recycling actually caused revolt among employees! Recycling at the workplace, whether it's an office, restaurant, or even a church, benefits from a clear plan and a dose of encouragement.

For more perspective on the issue, I contacted Sister Linda Volk, materials manager for the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ Ministry Center in Donaldson, Indiana, which includes a convent, a retreat facility, an assisted living residence, full-time and part-time employees, and a small college. Sister Linda has a warm smile and a quick wit, and, I discovered, a razor-sharp focus when it comes to managing waste at her workplace. She believes that an organized recycling program can teach people about sustainability, encouraging them to recycle wherever they are.

"At the ministry center," Sister Linda told me, "we're already immersed in the belief that every small effort, every small but conscious decision, every small but extra step ripples out and affects a much wider audience than just ourselves. One act geared toward sustainability can ripple out to influence others." To start the ripple

effect at one's workplace, she suggested taking the following steps: choose a materials manager, know the vendors, make recycling convenient, and plan to educate.

*Choose a materials manager.* A recycling effort lives and dies by its leadership. "To make your program work, you need to appoint someone who can take responsibility for this effort beginning to end," said Sister Linda. This person doesn't have to work in maintenance or housekeeping. He or she does need to be committed to recycling, able to set up a plan, and able to implement and sustain it.

*Know the vendors.* The materials manager's most important jobs are 1) to know the local recycling vendors, what types of materials they handle, and how they would like them contained for pickup, and 2) to communicate these facts to the employees. Discover where vendors take the recyclables after they've picked them up so that all employees know their materials are being recycled, not dumped. This can be enlightening, considering that most people have no idea where their trash ends up after it leaves their curb.

*Make recycling convenient.* Sister Linda suggests starting small, recycling a few items such as beverage containers, and gradually adding more: different types of plastic, paper, cardboard, etc. Set up a convenient recycling station, paying attention to the places people discard their recyclables such as break rooms or near

exit doors. Label each bin depending on its contents and put labels at eye level. Keep the station clean and put a regular trash can next to the recycle bin (to prevent people from throwing their trash in the bin). In a large workplace, such as a church, have several recycling stations throughout the building that are emptied routinely.

*Plan to educate.* The material manager demonstrates recycling and connects it to the bigger picture of caring for the earth. Sister Linda makes annual educational presentations to employees and residents at the ministry center to solicit their feedback and encourage them to participate, including handouts for their reference.

People often don't recycle because they are too busy, Sister Linda said. Make it easy and then be genuinely thankful for their efforts. She confessed that she gets discouraged when she sees someone toss a recyclable in the trash. But, she told me, it helps to always consider the person's dignity first. "Do I want to yell at that person because they didn't recycle?" she said. "Or do I want to leave them with a word of encouragement? Maybe later, at a better time, I could address this issue with them in a gentler way."

Starting a recycling program can be a big responsibility, but if handled well, it's an opportunity to conserve resources and encourage others to think more sustainably at work and at home. ■

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