Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management
2025, Vol. 25, No. 3, 110–122
https://jbam.scholasticahq.com/

ARTICLE

Towards a Framework of Acceptance for Sustainable Mobility: Managing Competing Interests in Organizations

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This paper puts forward a nuanced theoretical framework that sheds light on how organizations handle internal conflicts when pursuing sustainable mobility initiatives. Focusing specifically on the organizational level, the framework brings together key ideas from stakeholder theory, research on organizational change, and the literature on sustainability transitions (Freeman, 1984; Geels, 2002; Kotter, 1996). Rather than viewing acceptance as a straightforward or passive result, the paper interprets it as a complex and ongoing negotiation shaped by internal hierarchies, competing interests, and deeply rooted value-based resistance. Importantly, the framework includes both temporal and normative aspects, acknowledging that how organizations respond to change evolves over time. By addressing a notable gap in current research on internal organizational dynamics, the study offers a more layered theoretical perspective on why sustainability efforts either take root or falter in complex institutional settings. The final section offers practical guidance for practitioners tasked with steering such initiatives through organizational tensions.

As global efforts to address climate change intensify, the pursuit of sustainable mobility has gained significant traction as a strategic and environmental priority (Banister, 2008). Organizations across diverse sectors are increasingly being challenged to rethink how they manage mobility, aiming to reduce their ecological footprint in practical and measurable ways. This shift often involves the introduction of electric vehicle fleets, support for public transportation, the rollout of mobility-as-a-service platforms, and encouragement of cycling and walking as daily commuting options (Shaheen & Cohen, 2013). Despite the broad recognition of these strategies as both necessary and urgent, their implementation frequently encounters resistance from within the very organizations tasked with leading the change (Lozano, 2013).

What makes this resistance particularly complex is that it rarely stems from purely logistical or financial concerns. More often, it reflects deeper organizational frictions such as divergent mandates, conflicting perceptions of risk, and underlying value differences among internal stakeholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). While the literature on sustainable mobility has expanded considerably in recent years, especially regarding technical and infrastructural innovations, considerably less attention has been directed toward the internal social and political dynamics that often shape, constrain, or enable these efforts (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Hahn et al., 2014). This paper takes up that challenge by proposing a framework designed to illuminate the internal negotiations and conflicts that accompany sustainable mobility initiatives.

By concentrating on the organizational level, the framework examines how acceptance is gradually formed, debated, and eventually embedded within existing structures and routines (Burnes, 2004). Organizations are understood here not as unified entities but as contested spaces, where different interests, rationalities, and institutional logics interact and sometimes reinforcing one another, but often clashing in the broader context of sustainability transitions (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Theoretical Background

Organizational Acceptance of Sustainability Initiatives

In much of organizational theory, the concept of acceptance is commonly treated as the formal approval of a new rule, process, or practice (Rogers, 2003). But that framing can be misleading. It risks flattening the rich, often unpredictable processes that occur within organizations into a simple binary: either compliance or resistance. What happens is far more intricate. Acceptance tends to unfold gradually, influenced by shifting power dynamics, established institutional routines, and the push and pull between individual actions and collective structures (Ansari et al., 2010; Ford et al., 2008).

These tensions are especially pronounced when organizations try to introduce sustainability-related initiatives. Such efforts typically unsettle long-standing assumptions about what the organization is for, how it should operate, and what counts as success (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Senge et al., 2008). Under these conditions, formal endorsement means very little on its own. Acceptance doesn't happen all at once. It comes together, slowly and often unevenly, through how people interpret what's happening, how they navigate internal politics, and how deeply these new ideas can take root culturally (Greenwood et al., 2011; Suchman, 1995).

One lens that's particularly helpful here is the theory of institutional work. Rather than focusing only on structures or outcomes, it looks at the day-to-day efforts of individuals and groups who try, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to shape or reshape the institutions they're part

Article citation: Voit, A.K. (2025). Towards a framework of acceptance for sustainable mobility: Managing competing interests in organizations. *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management, 25*(3), 110-122.

of (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In the realm of sustainability, this often involves translating environmental goals into something that feels relevant and legitimate within the organization's existing priorities (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). These actors might use storytelling, symbolic gestures, or informal networks to build coalitions and align interests that might not otherwise converge (Kaplan, 2008).

All of this points to a broader insight: acceptance isn't a single moment, nor is it ever final. It's an ongoing process. It evolves as legitimacy is built, as practices are embedded into organizational culture, and as people adapt, interpret, and respond over time.

Stakeholder Theory in Organizational Contexts

Stakeholder theory, in its original form, framed organizations as entities embedded within a broader system of external relationships with customers, regulators, community groups. Each representing interests that organizations could not afford to ignore (Freeman, 1984). Over time, however, scholars have expanded this perspective, showing that the same logic applies just as well within organizations themselves (Mitchell et al., 1997). Inside the organizational structure, different departments, teams, and individuals often act as stakeholders, with varying priorities, levels of influence, and normative commitments.

In the realm of sustainability, these internal stakeholders frequently hold contrasting views on new initiatives. Their positions are rarely uniform and tend to be shaped by their functional roles, exposure to risk, relative power within the hierarchy, and most importantly their own identities and belief systems (Bundy et al., 2013; Eskerod & Jepsen, 2013). To take a simple example: what seems like a logical and mission-consistent step for a sustainability or CSR unit may appear overly burdensome, or even strategically misaligned, to those working in operations or finance (Hahn et al., 2014).

To make sense of these internal differences, it is useful to pair stakeholder theory with the idea of organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking focuses on how people interpret new or ambiguous developments such as how they filter, frame, and narrate them, often in ways that are grounded more in identity or values than in strictly economic reasoning. Sustainability, as a field, is particularly susceptible to such interpretive variability. Stakeholders rarely respond to it as a neutral or technical shift; rather, their engagement is filtered through what they believe the organization is, or should be (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

What follows is that understanding acceptance with particularly in the context of sustainability requires more than identifying support or opposition. It means tracing how various internal logics compete, clash, or converge over time. These processes are political, iterative, and often messy, involving negotiation, reframing, and the hard work of building common ground (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012; Rowley, 1997).

Organizational Change and Sustainability Transitions

Sustainability transitions represent a particularly complex form of organizational change. One that typically involves a high degree of uncertainty, overlapping institutional pressures, and a need for both structural reform and cultural evolution (Geels, 2011; Loorbach, 2010). These transitions differ fundamentally from more incremental forms of change, which tend to focus on refining or optimizing current practices. In contrast, sustainability transformations often require organizations to rethink core assumptions: business models may need redefinition, value propositions might shift, and even the organization's broader identity can come under review (Van der Heijden, 2005).

The change management literature has long pointed to leadership, strategic communication, and narrative alignment as pivotal elements for guiding transformation (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Kotter, 1996). Yet, when it comes to sustainability, these elements can become sites of tension rather than sources of cohesion. Initiatives in this area frequently challenge the very narratives that have traditionally held organizations together (Markard et al., 2012). They raise ethical questions, demand a longer-term view, and introduce social and environmental concerns that often sit uncomfortably alongside market-centric reasoning (Schaltegger et al., 2012).

In such contexts, leadership plays a different kind of role. It goes beyond coordination or implementation. Leaders are expected to serve as cultural figures. Individuals capable of shaping meaning, framing sustainability as a shared aspiration, and building legitimacy for actions that may not yield immediate returns (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Organizational storytelling, too, must evolve. Sustainability cannot remain a peripheral issue; it has to be woven into how the organization understands its own purpose (Waddell, 2016).

What further complicates these transitions is that they are rarely linear (Markard et al., 2012). Trial and error, learning through experimentation, and the emergence of new alliances all play a role in the unfolding process (Brown et al., 2021). Indeed, much of the work lies not in changing official procedures, but in shifting mindsets, expectations, and the broader meaning systems that guide behaviour (Bromley & Powell, 2012).

For this reason, analysing acceptance in the context of sustainability transitions requires more than tracking procedural updates (Markard et al., 2012). It calls for an approach that accounts for both surface-level adjustments and the deeper cultural reconfigurations that shape how change is experienced and internalized.

Theoretical Approach: Conceptual Methodology

Conceptual Research Design: Rationale and Scope

This paper is based on a conceptual, non-empirical research design that draws from critical traditions in organizational theory and sustainability scholarship. Instead of producing new empirical findings, the goal here is to

bring together and build upon existing theoretical insights in order to offer a more integrated framework: one that can help explain the internal organizational dynamics that shape how sustainable mobility initiatives are received and negotiated.

There are two main reasons for taking this theoretical approach. First, the subject at hand, how sustainability is accepted within organizations, remains both theoretically complex and relatively underdeveloped in the literature (Ansari et al., 2010; Hoffman & Jennings, 2015). It cuts across several domains and resists simple categorization. Second, while existing work on stakeholder engagement, institutional theory, and sustainability transitions has produced valuable insights, much of it remains scattered across different academic disciplines (Smith & Lewis, 2011). As a result, we still lack a coherent perspective that can account for the ways in which identity, structure, culture, and power interact within organizational settings (Geels, 2011; Gioia et al., 2013a).

A conceptual methodology, in this context, provides the flexibility needed to bridge these gaps. It allows for theoretical synthesis across disciplines and invites reflection on how different bodies of knowledge intersect: a process sometimes referred to as meta-theoretical thinking (MacInnis, 2011; Swedberg, 2016). Such an approach is particularly useful when dealing with emerging or complex issues, where the empirical terrain is still evolving and where what is most needed is conceptual clarity rather than immediate generalization (Suddaby, 2010).

Epistemological and Ontological Positioning

This paper takes an interpretivist approach to knowledge and draws on a critical realist understanding of reality. The basic assumption here is that organizations are not mechanical systems operating under universal laws. Instead, they are socially constructed environments as places where people interpret, contest, and rework meanings, identities, and power relationships in everyday practice (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Within this frame, the idea of "acceptance" is not treated as something binary. It's not just a matter of whether change is adopted or resisted. It's seen as something that happens over time: gradually, often unevenly, and always shaped by context (Ford et al., 2008; Greenwood et al., 2011).

At the same time, the paper is grounded in a critical realist ontology. This view holds that, while our understanding of the world is socially shaped, there are underlying structures that exist whether or not we fully perceive them. These structures can enable or limit what actors are able to do, even as they make sense of their environment in different ways (Bhaskar, 1978; Danermark et al., 2002). Combining these two perspectives of interpretivism and critical realism it makes it possible to examine both the visible and invisible forces that shape sustainability transitions inside organizations.

Method of Theory Development: Conceptual Synthesis and Abductive Reasoning

The framework proposed in this study emerged through a process of conceptual synthesis, guided by abductive reasoning. Rather than beginning with a fixed theory or a predetermined hypothesis, the approach involved piecing together insights from a wide array of theoretical sources looking for connections, tensions, and overlooked possibilities. Conceptual synthesis, in this context, refers to the creative task of assembling, contrasting, and weaving together existing ideas to form new conceptual patterns (Cornelissen, 2017; Jabareen, 2009). This method is particularly suited to topics that cut across disciplines or where the existing theoretical tools fall short in addressing new or evolving challenges.

Abductive reasoning, which played a supporting role throughout, allowed for flexibility in the theory-building process. Though the study does not rely on empirical data in the traditional sense, it still engaged in iterative reflection between observed tendencies in the literature and emerging theoretical constructs. Abduction, at its core, is about moving back and forth between what's known, what's puzzling, and what might explain the puzzle in a fresh way (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This helped surface conceptual gaps and opened space for reframing assumptions and building something new that still resonated with practical and scholarly observations.

Three interlinked strategies shaped the construction of the framework:

Theoretical Integration involved pulling together strands from several traditions: stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997), institutional theory (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Scott, 2001), and the literature on sustainability transitions (Geels, 2011; Loorbach, 2010). By bringing these perspectives into conversation, the study develops a more comprehensive understanding of how organizations navigate competing demands around sustainability.

Construct Reconfiguration focused on rethinking key concepts considering their relevance to sustainability. Concepts like resistance, legitimacy, framing, and identity were not taken at face value but were instead reinterpreted to reflect how they operate in sustainability-related contexts (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hahn et al., 2014; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Resistance, for instance, is not simply treated as a hurdle but as a form of meaning-making embedded in deeper identity tensions.

Typological Abstraction was used to organize the theory into a structured but flexible model. Drawing on the logic of typological theorizing (Doty & Glick, 1994), the framework identifies three overlapping domains of conflict: strategic, operational, and normative. Each domain is associated with particular actors, mechanisms, and temporal dynamics, offering a way to map how different kinds of resistance and negotiation unfold over time.

Sources of Theoretical Insight

The conceptual basis for this work rests on a deliberately mixed set of theoretical traditions. Rather than adopting a single dominant model, the framework takes shape through the intersection of several key areas of scholarship.

Stakeholder theory forms one pillar, especially strands that focus on internal dynamics and critiques of overly rationalist perspectives (Bundy et al., 2013; Eskerod & Jepsen, 2013; Freeman, 1984). Alongside this, institutional theory and organizational change literature contribute insights on how actors make sense of transitions and how resistance functions within shifting structures (Ford et al., 2008; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Seo & Creed, 2002; Weick, 1995).

A further strand comes from sustainability transitions research, which emphasizes system-level complexity, temporal layering, and conflicting values that shape the direction and pace of change (Geels, 2002; Loorbach et al., 2017; Schaltegger et al., 2012). Cultural and identity theory, finally, provides a way to understand how sustainability becomes symbolically charged inside organizations and how meaning itself can become a site of contestation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gioia et al., 2013b; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

The selection of literature was guided by relevance and theoretical coherence rather than disciplinary boundaries. Analysis was carried out through a loosely structured process of thematic comparison, coding, and abstraction. Attention was given to patterns in how constructs were defined, which assumptions they rested on, and what kinds of explanations they offered. While the sources differ in scope, the integration process focused on building a layered perspective capable of capturing the tensions central to sustainability transitions in organizations.

Quality Criteria for Conceptual Research

In the absence of empirical testing, the study draws on established criteria for assessing theoretical contributions, as outlined in prior methodological literature (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Whetten, 1989). Several dimensions shaped the evaluation of the framework's quality and relevance.

Originality is reflected in the study's focus on an underexplored intersection, namely, how internal stakeholder dynamics intersect with the challenges of implementing sustainable mobility initiatives. Utility was also a key concern, with the framework intended to serve as a diagnostic aid for both researchers and practitioners working through the organizational complexities that often accompany sustainability transitions.

Regarding parsimony and conceptual richness, the framework seeks to strike a balance: it remains theoretically substantive yet avoids drifting into abstract generality by anchoring its constructs in established lines of scholarship. As for heuristic potential, the model is meant not as a final answer but as a starting point, something that can prompt future empirical studies and open new lines of critical inquiry.

To reinforce the framework's conceptual integrity, the development process involved ongoing peer feedback, sustained engagement with critical and foundational texts, and a careful effort to ensure internal consistency and definitional clarity (Bacharach, 1989; Suddaby, 2010). While the absence of data limits some forms of validation, the emphasis throughout was on coherence, relevance, and the capacity to extend existing theory.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The Given the conceptual focus of this paper, several limitations should be acknowledged. To begin with, the framework has not yet been subjected to empirical validation. Although it is grounded in established theory, its actual usefulness and explanatory reach can only be determined through application in varied organizational settings.

Another limitation concerns the model's emphasis on internal organizational dynamics. While this focus was deliberate, it means that broader institutional forces such as regulatory environments, public discourse, and relationships between organizations are not explored in detail (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Future research could expand the framework to account for these external dimensions by adopting a more explicitly multi-level approach (Waddell, 2016).

A further point relates to the framework's cultural positioning. While it is intended to be broadly relevant, it does rest on assumptions that may reflect organizational norms common in Western contexts. As a result, its applicability across different cultural, sectoral, or regional settings cannot be taken for granted. Comparative work will be important to assess whether the framework holds up in diverse environments or requires modification (Jackson, 2005; Tsui, 2004).

Development of the Framework

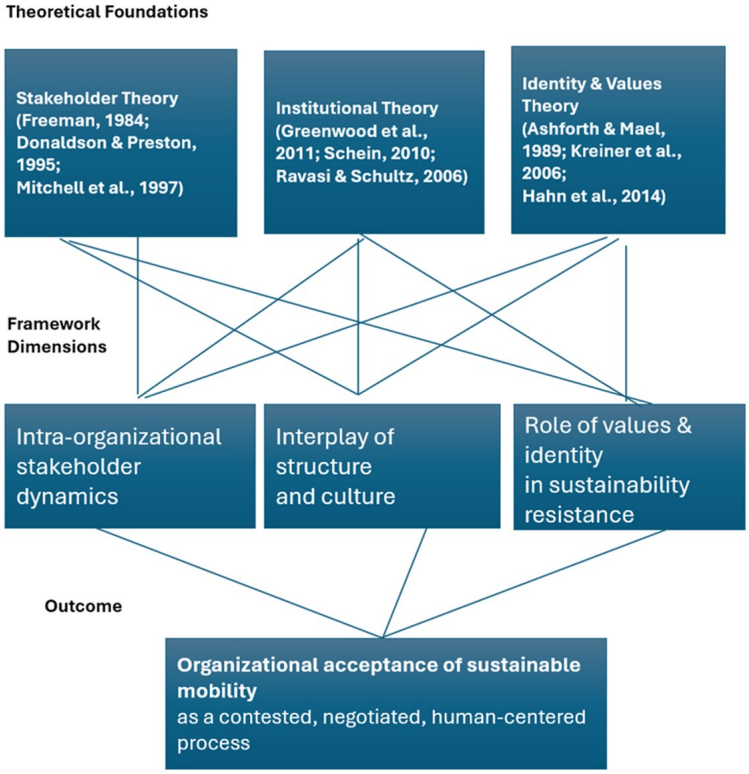
The proposed framework makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature on sustainable mobility and organizational acceptance. By foregrounding in--organizational stakeholder dynamics, the interplay between organizational structure and culture, and the role of values and identity in sustainability resistance, the framework deepens and extends existing theories in meaningful ways.

The Figure shows how the framework integrates insights from stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and identity and values theory. It foregrounds three core dimensions that are intra-organizational stakeholder dynamics, the interplay of structure and culture, and the role of values and identity in sustainability resistance to explain organizational acceptance of sustainable mobility as a contested, negotiated, and human-centred process.

As shown in the Table, stakeholder theory has traditionally emphasized external actors and their salience but offers less insight into intra-organizational dynamics. Institutional theory provides valuable accounts of governance and culture yet often treats these separately rather than as mutually shaping forces. Identity and values per-

Figure

Framework for Understanding Organizational Acceptance of Sustainable Mobility



Note. Own illustration based on Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Greenwood et al., 2011; Hahn et al., 2014; Kreiner et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 1997, Schein, 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006.

spectives highlight the symbolic and emotional dimensions of change but tend to isolate these from broader organizational structures. By contrast, the proposed framework integrates these elements, showing how intra-organizational dynamics, structural-cultural interplay, and identity-based tensions combine to shape sustainability acceptance. This integrated view underscores why acceptance is best understood as a contested, negotiated process rather than a straightforward outcome.

Intra-organizational stakeholder dynamics

An important aspect of this framework lies in how it turns attention inward—toward the dynamics unfolding among internal stakeholders. While the dominant threads of stakeholder theory have historically focused on actors outside the organization (Freeman, 1984), this approach shifts the emphasis. It looks at how individuals within the organization, whether executives, team leads, or employee representatives, position themselves in relation to sustainability-driven changes in mobility.

What sets these actors apart is not just their organizational role, but the way they respond. Some may advocate for such initiatives; others might attempt to reshape them, while some resist altogether. These reactions are rarely neutral and often shaped by internal logics, ranging from strategic self-interest to value-based commitments (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997). Rather than assuming alignment, the framework foregrounds the tensions and negotiations that play out internally, suggesting that "acceptance" is better understood as a shifting, and at times contested, outcome.

Interplay of structure and culture in organizational change

A further contribution of the framework lies in how it engages with the intersection between structural change and cultural context in organizations. Prior research has noted that even well-designed structural interventions such as changes to governance or incentives can fall flat if they overlook the deeper cultural foundations that shape behaviour in everyday settings (Greenwood et al., 2011). This includes the values people hold, the assumptions they rarely question, and the ways they make sense of what change actually means.

Building on that view, the framework deliberately brings together formal systems and informal dynamics. It considers how meanings are shared (or contested), how symbols and routines operate beneath the surface, and

Table

Comparison of Proposed Framework with Existing Theories

Theory/approach	Core focus	Limitation in sustainability acceptance	How the proposed framework extends/differs
Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997)	External stakeholders, power/salience of actors	Focuses mostly on external actors, overlooks intra-organizational contestation	Shifts focus inward to intra-organizational dynamics and tensions among internal actors
Institutional Theory (Greenwood et al., 2011; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Schein, 2010)	Structures, governance, cultural assumptions	Treats structure and culture separately; risks overemphasizing formal systems	Brings structure and culture together, showing how they interact in shaping acceptance/resistance
Identity & Values Perspectives (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hahn et al., 2014; Kreiner et al., 2006)	Identity, values, emotions in organizational behavior	Often isolates identity from broader stakeholder/cultural dynamics	Integrates identity and values with stakeholder and cultural dynamics to explain sustainability resistance
Proposed Framework	Intra-organizational stakeholder dynamics; structure–culture interplay; values & identity	—	Provides integrated, multi-level account of contested organizational acceptance of sustainable mobility

Note. This table compares the proposed framework with established theoretical traditions. The framework integrates elements of stakeholder, institutional, and identity/value theories, but extends them by highlighting intra-organizational dynamics, the interplay of structure and culture, and the role of values and identity in sustainability resistance.

how these softer elements influence how sustainability initiatives are interpreted and acted upon (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Schein, 2010). The result is not just a more layered account of change, but one that reflects how transformation is often negotiated culturally, not just engineered structurally.

Role of values and identity in sustainability resistance

A further theoretical contribution of this framework is its focus on the role of values and identity in shaping organizational resistance to sustainability-related change. Resistance, in this view, is not simply about rejecting information or making calculated objections. Instead, sustainability initiatives can unsettle people on a more personal level by clashing with professional identities or by being perceived as morally charged or even imposed (Hahn et al., 2014). These reactions are not just strategic; they are emotional, often tied to how individuals see themselves and their roles within the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kreiner et al., 2006).

This dynamic becomes even more pronounced in workplaces that house multiple subcultures or competing value systems. In such environments, even well-intentioned sustainability efforts can be seen as threats and implicitly questioning the legitimacy of established practices or identities. What the framework tries to capture is how these symbolic and affective layers matter. They help explain why certain initiatives stall, not just because of structure or strategy, but because they touch something deeper.

Taken together, the framework offers a way to think about sustainable mobility acceptance as more than a technical or procedural matter. It brings together stakeholder influence, organizational culture, and identity-related tensions in one model. In doing so, it broadens both stakeholder theory and institutional theory, and invites more human-centred, politically aware perspectives on how sustainability transitions unfold in real organizational settings.

Theoretical Contributions Derived from the Framework

Dimensions of Conflict

The implementation of sustainable mobility initiatives is rarely a purely technical endeavour; rather, it is imbued with tensions that span multiple organizational dimensions. Drawing on the foundational distinctions by Lozano (2013) and Schaltegger et al. (2012), three key axes of conflict can be delineated: strategic, operational, and normative.

Strategic conflicts are rooted in contradictions at the highest levels of organizational decision-making. These tensions often reflect a classic dualism between economic

performance objectives such as growth, competitiveness, and shareholder value and the imperatives of environmental responsibility (Eccles et al., 2014). For instance, the strategic choice to invest in electric vehicle infrastructure might be undermined by short-term return-on-investment concerns, highlighting the trade-offs organizations must navigate (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

Operational conflicts are more immediate and concern the logistics of implementing sustainability initiatives. These include issues related to supply chain restructuring, infrastructure retrofitting, cost management, and employee retraining (Bocken et al., 2014). Operational resistance often stems from path dependencies, deeply entrenched practices and investments that render sustainable alternatives costly or complex to integrate (Unruh, 2000).

Normative conflicts, perhaps the most intractable, involve clashes of values and organizational identity. These conflicts emerge when sustainability goals challenge established cultural norms or mental models within the organization (Hoffman, 2001). In organizations where the pursuit of sustainability is perceived as peripheral or ideological, attempts to mainstream it may provoke identity-based resistance (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). The lack of internalized sustainability values can thus create friction, particularly when initiatives are perceived as externally imposed or as conflicting with the core mission of the organization (Gioia et al., 2013a).

Understanding these dimensions of conflict is essential not only for diagnosing resistance but also for tailoring interventions that are contextually sensitive and strategically viable.

Negotiation and Power

The pathway to sustainability adoption is deeply embedded in organizational politics. As Pettigrew (1973) famously argued, organizational change is not merely a technical-rational process but a political one, where actors compete to influence outcomes. Within this terrain, sustainability change agents must develop the capacity to mobilize both formal and informal resources.

Power within organizations is rarely monolithic; it flows through both hierarchical structures and social networks. Effective change agents leverage both domains: navigating top-down mandates while also cultivating bottom-up coalitions (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). This dual approach enables them to embed sustainability into prevailing logics rather than positioning it as oppositional (Seo & Creed, 2002).

A central mechanism in this process is framing with the strategic use of narratives to shape how issues are perceived and evaluated. Maguire & Hardy (2009) emphasize the importance of storytelling in aligning sustainability with existing organizational values. For example, framing sustainable mobility as a driver of innovation and efficiency, rather than as a compliance burden, can shift the internal discourse and enable broader acceptance (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Kaplan, 2008).

Moreover, change agents often rely on what Hardy and Phillips (1998) call "discursive legitimacy": the ability to present sustainability initiatives as not only beneficial but also morally and institutionally appropriate. This discursive framing becomes particularly powerful when aligned with institutional logics that resonate within the organization, such as market competitiveness, technological leadership, or social responsibility (Thornton et al., 2012).

Temporal Evolution

Sustainability The process of gaining organizational acceptance for sustainability efforts rarely happens all at once. Instead, it tends to unfold gradually, moving through a series of overlapping phases. Insights from organizational change literature (Kotter, 1996; Senge et al., 2008) point to at least four key stages that help explain how this progression often takes shape: proposal, contestation, adaptation, and institutionalization.

It typically begins with the proposal phase where new sustainability ideas first enter the conversation. These ideas may come from internal advocates or outside consultants, but whatever their origin, they tend to provoke questions right away. Feasibility, relevance, alignment with existing goals. These are all common points of tension. And while initial pushback is often seen as an obstacle, it can also function as a form of early-stage testing, helping sharpen and clarify the proposal's direction (Ford et al., 2008).

As the process continues, a more adaptive stage usually follows. This is when learning begins to take hold, often through a messy and iterative mix of trial, feedback, and revision. During this phase, stakeholders may start to rethink not only their practical objections but their underlying assumptions. Drawing on the concept of double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), this stage offers space for deeper reflection, where even previously resistant individuals may begin to shift their stance, not because they were convinced by logic alone, but because experience gradually changes what feels viable.

The final phase is what can be called institutionalization. At this point, sustainability becomes more than an initiative, it starts to be woven into the routines, structures, and even the self-understanding of the organization. Institutional theory suggests that formal policies are only one part of this embedding process; just as important are the informal habits, shared stories, and cultural signals that reinforce what counts as legitimate (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). Markers like awards, certifications, or external recognition often emerge here, not just as outcomes but as symbols of internal consolidation.

Seen this way, sustainability acceptance isn't just a matter of implementation, it's a temporal journey. The passage through resistance, rather than signalling failure, can open the door to dialogue and revision. For change agents, the challenge is often less about overcoming opposition and more about engaging with it constructively, as part of the broader process of organizational transformation.

Practical Implications

Efforts to implement sustainable mobility inside organizations often run into challenges that go well beyond

technical planning. While infrastructure and logistics matter, the deeper obstacles are usually social and political. Shifts in practice can unsettle routines, raise conflicts among different groups, or trigger resistance rooted in culture and values. These are not problems that can be solved with a checklist, they require careful, often strategic engagement.

The framework presented here is meant to support that kind of work. Rather than prescribing rigid steps, it outlines a set of practical strategies that draw from existing research in organizational change. These strategies are designed to help practitioners navigate internal tensions and build momentum, especially when the change process is slow or contested. The aim is to make sustainability not just possible, but durable, something that becomes part of how the organization operates over time.

Understanding and Diagnosing Resistance

Effective intervention begins with the ability to accurately diagnose the forms and sources of resistance to sustainable mobility initiatives. Resistance can be strategic, operational, or normative in nature, each requiring different managerial responses.

Strategic resistance typically stems from upper management concerns regarding conflicts between sustainability and profitability (Lozano, 2013). Senior leaders may perceive sustainable mobility efforts as a deviation from core financial imperatives unless a compelling business case is made (Epstein & Buhovac, 2014). Operational resistance, on the other hand, often arises from middle managers and frontline employees who face disruptions to established routines and logistical systems (Bocken et al., 2014). Finally, normative resistance reflects deeper cultural beliefs and values, such as an entrenched car-centric identity among employees or managers (Hoffman, 2001; Urry, 2004).

Tailoring responses to the specific type of resistance such as reframing strategic concerns with return-on-investment analyses, co-designing operational solutions with affected employees, or using storytelling to address normative barriers can significantly enhance change receptivity (Ford et al., 2008; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2006).

Stakeholder Engagement and Internal Coalitions

Transforming mobility within organizations is rarely the job of a single unit. These efforts tend to cut across functional areas, meaning that real progress often depends on building internal coalitions that reach beyond siloed departments and promote a sense of shared ownership (Freeman, 1984; Kotter, 1996).

Getting that kind of collaboration off the ground usually starts with identifying who's involved and who could help move things forward. Key players often span departments: human resources might influence commuting programs, logistics may oversee vehicle management, and finance often controls what's possible through budgeting decisions. Mapping these internal actors and potential change agents helps clarify where alignment is strong and where tensions may arise (Bryson, 2004). Bringing the right people together early, especially those with informal influence, can make it easier to balance competing interests and build credibility from the start (Kanter, 1983).

Equally important is the way people are involved. When engagement feels inclusive and fair, it contributes to what researchers describe as procedural justice. Something that significantly affects whether people stay committed over time (Colquitt et al., 2001). Giving stakeholders an active role in shaping the initiative not just reacting to it but also increases its fit with existing social dynamics inside the organization (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Strategic Framing and Narrative Building

The way an organization talks about sustainable mobility deeply affects how people inside the organization make sense of it and whether they support it. It's not just about presenting facts or goals. Framing these efforts in familiar terms, such as innovation, cost savings, or employee satisfaction, helps connect them to broader company values and strategies (Kaplan, 2008; Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

Stories are particularly powerful in this context. They give abstract ideas meaning and make change feel like part of a continuing journey rather than a sudden disruption (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Sonenshein, 2010). When leaders talk about mobility initiatives as part of the company's success or future vision, it becomes easier for employees to relate and harder to resist. These narratives work like mental shortcuts: they influence how people act, decide, and interpret what's happening around them (Garud et al., 2014).

It also helps to adapt the message to different audiences within the organization. People in sustainability roles may care more about environmental impact, while operations teams might be more interested in productivity or logistics. Tuning the communication to each group's priorities increases buy-in and makes change feel more relevant (Cornelissen, 2011).

Adaptive Timing and Phased Implementation

Change should be introduced incrementally and flexibly to accommodate organizational learning and contextual variability. Phased implementation, such as through pilot projects, offers a low-risk pathway to experimentation, feedback collection, and iterative improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Berkhout et al., 2004).

Pilots also act as boundary objects that translate abstract goals into tangible practices, helping to clarify expectations and dispel misconceptions (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Adaptive timing with coordinating rollouts with budget cycles, leadership transitions, or policy windows can also enhance receptivity and resource alignment (Kotter, 1996; Kingdon, 1995).

Furthermore, acknowledging that change acceptance evolves over time, from denial and contestation to adaptation and institutionalization, helps managers design interventions that are both resilient and context-sensitive (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

Institutionalizing Change Through Policies and Culture

For sustainable mobility to endure, it must transition from project status to institutional norm. This involves embedding mobility practices into formal organizational structures, such as HR policies (e.g., flexible work arrangements), performance metrics (e.g., carbon accounting), and budgeting procedures (Jackson, 2005).

Cultural reinforcement is equally vital. Leadership behavior serves as a powerful signal of organizational priorities. Leaders who model sustainable commuting or support policy enforcement set visible precedents that shape cultural expectations (Schein, 2010). Similarly, peer-driven storytelling, recognition programs, and symbolic gestures (e.g., green commuting days) contribute to norm-setting and social proof (Senge et al., 2008; Thøgersen, 2006).

Without cultural anchoring, formal policies risk being viewed as superficial or externally imposed, ultimately undermining their legitimacy and sustainability (Scott, 2001).

Monitoring and Evaluation

Sustained progress requires robust monitoring systems that capture both hard metrics and soft outcomes. Quantitative indicators such as reductions in vehicle fleet emissions, modal shifts, or fuel costs provide clear performance benchmarks (Hahn et al., 2014).

Equally important are qualitative measures such as employee satisfaction, perceived equity, or alignment with organizational values which reflect the deeper cultural and psychological impacts of change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Feedback loops should be designed to support double-loop learning, allowing for re-evaluation of underlying assumptions and goals when outcomes diverge from expectations (Argyris, 1991). Transparent reporting, participatory evaluation, and course corrections based on emergent insights further institutionalize a culture of learning and continuous improvement (Patton, 2011).

An important caveat in advancing sustainability transitions lies in the recognition of adverse metrics that cannot be compromised for the sake of either short-term or long-term gains. While organizations may pursue ambitious mobility initiatives, certain indicators represent non-negotiable guardrails. These include employee health and safety (Kramar, 2014), equitable accessibility (Lucas, 2012), and regulatory compliance and legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Financial viability must also remain intact, as sustainability strategies that undermine solvency are inherently unsustainable (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). Finally, stakeholder trust and value alignment form critical thresholds; when neglected, they undermine both the legitimacy and longevity of sustainability efforts (Hahn et al., 2015). Scholars and practitioners alike often underestimate these boundaries yet acknowledging them is essential to avoid strategies that are symbolically ambitious but practically unsustainable.

Conclusion

Getting sustainable mobility accepted within an organization isn't a matter of simply issuing a policy or running a campaign, it's a layered process shaped by strategic priorities, daily operations, and deeply held values. This paper offers a theoretical framework designed to help navigate that complexity, drawing on established research in transition theory and organizational change (Geels, 2002; Loorbach, 2010).

For many organizations today, the shift toward more sustainable mobility practices has moved from the margins to the mainstream. It's no longer just a 'green' add-on; it's tied to long-term relevance, adaptability, and legitimacy in an environment that's changing faster than ever. Still, turning ambition into action is rarely straightforward. What's proposed here is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but a way of thinking about acceptance as something that is shaped, reshaped, and often contested inside organizations.

By breaking resistance down into three areas such as strategic, operational, and normative, the framework helps identify not just where pushback might occur, but why. Rather than seeing these frictions as roadblocks, the analysis suggests they can actually serve as points of leverage. Insights from stakeholder theory, sustainability transitions, and organizational change show that internal tensions, when addressed carefully, can fuel rather than hinder transformation.

On the practical side, effective implementation needs more than technical solutions. It demands an approach that blends analysis with leadership instincts, cultural awareness, and the ability to adapt in real time. Building alliances, crafting coherent narratives, rolling out change in phases, and listening to feedback consistently, these aren't just good management practices; they're the building blocks of long-lasting change.

Time is another critical factor. Acceptance doesn't happen all at once. It unfolds as people gradually adjust, reflect, and align their routines and identities with new ideas. By embedding mobility goals into the organization's everyday culture and way of working, the change becomes more than just surface-level, it becomes part of the institution itself.

Looking ahead, this framework needs to be tested and adjusted in practice. Different industries, regions, and organizational cultures will likely reveal new insights about how internal acceptance plays out. Future studies should examine how factors like regulation, leadership models, or organizational maturity shape these dynamics. That kind of empirical work is essential if we're serious about embedding sustainability into the heart of organizational life—not just as an initiative, but as an enduring shift.

Outlook

Looking ahead, sustainable mobility is poised to play an even more central role in how organizations define

their strategies, especially as outside pressures continue to grow. Around the world, regulatory standards are becoming stricter, stakeholder expectations are shifting, and digital technologies are rapidly changing how mobility is both delivered and experienced. In this fast-moving environment, organizations that manage to align their internal systems and workplace cultures with sustainability goals will be better positioned to thrive.

Emerging technologies add another layer of complexity and promise. From AI-powered mobility platforms and electric fleets to integrated mobility-as-a-service (MaaS) models, these tools open up new possibilities, but they also come with challenges. Technical rollouts alone won't be enough. What's equally important is how organizations manage the human side of change: building inclusive conversations, encouraging collaboration, and staying mindful of ethical implications.

A key issue for the future will be the relationship between individual action and institutional structure. The most adaptive organizations will likely be those that empower their people by treating staff not just as implementers, but as co-creators of sustainable solutions. In this light, questions around leadership, organizational learning, and collaboration across sectors deserve more focused attention. Exploring these areas can help clarify what actually drives internal acceptance when new mobility practices are introduced.

And finally, in a world increasingly shaped by global crises from climate disruption to social upheaval. Sustainable mobility will take on greater symbolic and strategic meaning. It will no longer be just about cutting emissions or saving costs. Instead, it will serve as a reflection of how seriously an organization takes its broader responsibilities. The framework outlined in this paper is a small step toward that larger shift: helping organizations think more deliberately, and act more decisively, in reimagining their role in a sustainable future.

Lastly, the changes from AI need also be considered (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). This will also influence the topic of sustainability in the future (Dhayal et al., 2025).

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