

# Green skills for green futures

How organisations can move towards  
transformative green leadership

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## AUTHOR

**Lilybell Evergreen**


Demos Helsinki, Expert, Climate Governance

## ABOUT DEMOS HELSINKI

Demos Helsinki is a globally operating, independent think tank that has spent the last two decades fighting for a fair, sustainable and joyful next era. We conduct research and offer a range of consultancy services, including capacity-building and training and strategic advisory across sectors. Since day one, our community has been built on the idea that change can only happen together. That is why we carry out direct engagements and research projects with hundreds of partners around the world. We are fully independent, without any political affiliations and predominantly project-funded.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Jenni Kilpi, Johannes Nuutinen, Angeliki Vourdaki, Annu Mathew, Otso Sillanaukee



Political support for climate action has been growing (albeit slowly) and is matched by rapid development and implementation of technical solutions that support accelerating green transitions. However, backlash towards climate action is simultaneously gaining momentum both in civil society, business and politics, casting a growing shadow on hopes for bolder global commitments and action on climate change.

The climate crisis — and other interlinked crises — have provided organisations with a profoundly uncertain future, challenging the current way of thinking and doing. Alongside policymakers and people, organisations play a critical role in both delivering solutions and steering broader actions for a green transition. This requires not only being active in current society, but **proactive** in building a better future. In a world of interconnectedness, and rapid and unforeseen change, **for organisations to pursue their own interests they must now also think of collective interests.**

Organisations and their capacities to deliver on climate solutions is, however, turning out to be an additional gridlock in advancing and accelerating responses to the climate crisis. After all, what use are solutions if you can't push them into action?

The current discussion on organisational capabilities to contribute to green transitions revolves around green skills. While useful, **the discussion focuses strongly on technical skills** that individuals need so they can implement green solutions.

**Not enough attention is given to how organisational leadership, operating practices, and culture can drive bold action on many fronts. To be capable of operating and delivering needed actions in this new era, organisations need new green capabilities and skills.**

This white paper describes how organisations can build transformative green leadership skills that are key to unlocking other green skills, increasing organisational resilience in a changing world, and looking at the big picture of how your organisation impacts wider society.

Demos Helsinki launched this white paper in parallel to COP28's global meeting of leaders. We hope that its message empowers organisations and gives them tangible ways to act now for their own resilience and for society as a whole.

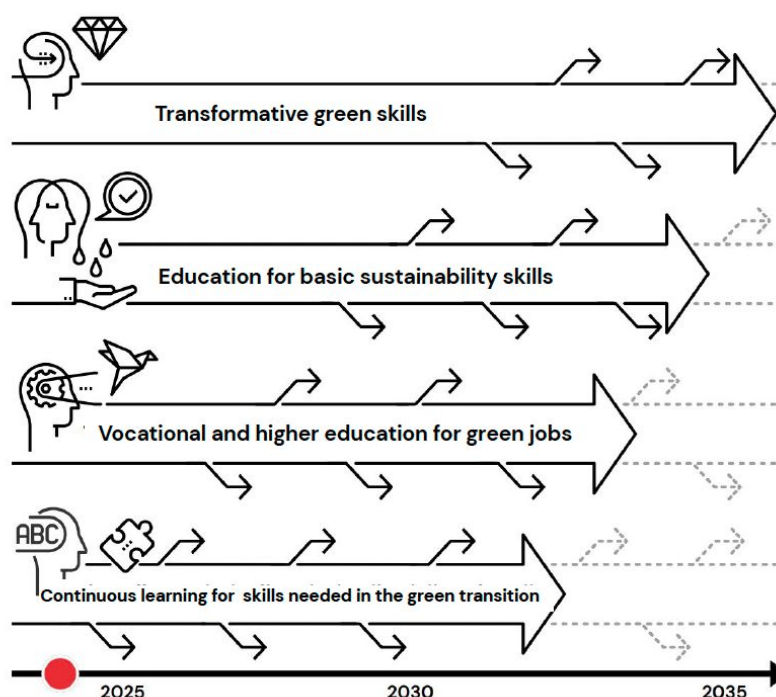
## Case example: Green Skills in Finland

In 2022–2023, Demos Helsinki led the VISIOS research project, funded by the Finnish Government's analysis, assessment and research activities, to study how the green transition would affect the labour market and jobs in Finland, and what kinds of skills would be essential in the future.

A key takeaway was that different types of skills are needed over different time spans as society transitions. Some also take longer to have an effect than others, yet they are interlinked and build on each other. Crucially, all of these different types of green skills are needed in order to navigate a desired path through the current crises. However, **transformative green leadership skills currently remain underexplored** as one of the keys to propelling other types of green skills to develop.

Put simply, this refers to the skills needed to explore new paths and approaches, instead of relying on the illusion of predictability that existing yet outdated approaches provide. This means being bold in letting go of structures that do not support the set goals. **Leadership is key** to forming and adapting an organisation's approach to the green transition, and encouraging experimentalism to find new ways of building skills and practices to aid the organisation's role in the green transition.

Different forms of skills and education are needed in green transition. Their impacts become visible at different time scales.



# Embracing transformative green leadership

To lead society through the current crises, we need to identify and address root causes – structures, mindsets, forms – not only symptoms. There is currently limited understanding of how to utilise and build transformational capability of organisations and leadership both in educational offerings – e.g. MBAs, public leadership courses – and within organisational management, culture, and continuous workplace training.

Based on **two decades working with public and private actors to create meaningful routes to impact**, we have identified key elements that organisations and leaders need to be able to act in green transitions, as well as ways they can push them into action and continually navigate a world in transition.

## “What is needed?”

### Long-termism

*The ability to anticipate how potential futures could affect organisational strategy and the skills and tools they should proactively develop today to build resilience. Even more, organisations need to form a strong vision of what is desirable. Only then can they steer towards it.*

### Experimentalism

*Embrace learning-by-doing as no one has all the answers for how to systematically affect change. This means testing different hypotheses of ways to affect change through different organisational units and processes, and iterating to refine the approach over time.*

### Collaboration

*Organisations need to plan beyond single organisations and instead identify needs within and across sectors to collectively build connections, capacities, and resilience across an interdependent society. To pursue their own interests, organisations must now also think of collective interests.*

## “How can I push it into action today?”

To thrive in the green transition, organisations need leaders who are bold with a future-oriented vision and understanding of how the green transition will impact their organisation and what role to take. Leadership which harnesses long-termism, experimentalism, and collaboration is key to embedding these elements into organisational culture, management, and practices at all levels. It is the first step to wider adoption of elements key to navigating through continuous change.

***In order to do this, organisations need to...***

### Long-termism

#### **Connect the everyday with long-term aims:**

Build the mindset and tools in mid to senior management to enable them to orient the whole organisation's mindset and daily practices towards a bold vision of the future. This skill set should not be reserved only for the C-suite: to constantly orient towards this future, it needs to be ingrained into daily practices across organisational levels.

We have supported and trained hundreds of mid to senior management in institutionalising and applying strategic foresight — from a strategic foresight model for the Finnish Ministry of Interior (highlighted by the OECD), to RATP, the world's fourth-largest public transport operator.

### Experimentalism

#### **Build a transformative and inquisitive culture:**

Actions are an outcome of not only strategy but also culture which is founded on the collective creation and understanding of common purpose and practices. Great uncertainty requires an experimentalist approach to developing new practices and processes. Culture and mindset is key to embracing the unknown and need for continuous iteration, rather than being afraid of it.

We have various experiences of creating experimentalist cultures and practices, e.g., collaborating with Meta's global strategic program Open Loop to explore experimentalist technology governance to build openness and trust.

### Collaboration

#### **Create coalitions for change:**

Green transitions require simultaneous action from many actors. Many organisations already invest in international networks to share learnings and best practices. At its most impactful, this goes beyond collaboration and becomes coalitions that collectively act towards reimagining the future of their industry and create systems of change.

We have strong experience working with coalitions of actors to collectively create change from e.g. supporting Finnish ministries in co-creating a Circular Economy Green Deal together with +80 stakeholder organisations and multiple research institutes, to currently reconceptualising the Finnish care sector.

We believe we need transformative leaders who understand and utilise long-termism, experimentalism, and collaboration. This is key to reimagining how organisations can contribute to the green transition including the different types of skills this requires.

Whether you are a CEO, trade union leader, public official, or philanthropist, **you have the ability to act today** to push change in your organisation across executive leadership, organisational culture, tools and mindset of management, and collaborative efforts beyond your organisation. These are the starting points but, of course, much more is needed to boldly transform the way we embed sustainability across actors, industries, and societies.

**Join us to build transformative green leadership skills, organisational resilience, and be part of the wider endeavour to transform the way organisations act to catalyse action towards a joyful, sustainable future.**

## Want to read more?

Here is a selection of our work:

- [Forms matter: Beyond organisations and other forms of collective action](#)
- [A New Ethos for the Civil Service: From Bureaucrats to Agents of Governance](#)
- Model for Strategic Foresight for the Administrative branch of the Ministry of Interior of Finland – [highlighted by the OECD as an example of a systemic driver for anticipatory innovation.](#)
- [RATP, Paris – The world's fourth biggest public transport operator examines the year 2035](#)
- [Open Loop: Experimental governance meets emerging tech](#)
- [Ministry of the Environment of Finland: Circular Economy Green Deal](#)