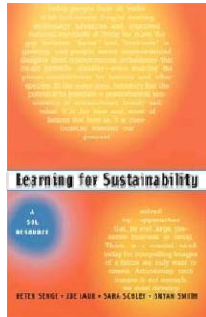


Learning for Sustainability



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■ About the Author

■ The Big Idea

Practicing sustainability in business is not easy. For companies, this entails that business decisions should consider the social and environmental consequences, along with the economic impacts, of doing business.

Learning for Sustainability encourages dialogue among businesses and organizations of the need to create living organizations in harmony with the natural and social world. It tells positive stories of people and organizations who wrestle with the challenges of incorporating sustainability principles in mainstream business practices. More importantly, this book will guide readers on how to build the creative capabilities critical to the work of sustainability.

The Sustainability Agenda

The last 20 years have seen growing concerns about economic systems and business models that foster economic disparity and environmental imbalances, despite technological advances and improved standards of living. These concerns have inspired intense discussions about sustainability.

The sustainability discourse encompasses two objectives. One, to reduce un-sustainability by improving dangerous and wasteful practices; and two, to promote generative sustainability that will create a world where human and natural systems can thrive together.

The first aim translates into efforts toward reducing toxic emissions, improving eco-efficiency, and giving aid to less-developed countries. While the second aim, aspires to create economic systems that are in harmony with natural principles and which generate zero waste, a sun-based energy system, and an ethic of interdependency among all peoples.

■ Sustainability Defined

Sustainability, as used in modern economics and business, refers to the ability of systems and organizations to continue indefinitely without depletion or diminished profits. This definition of sustainability, however, does not encompass strategies and perspectives of economic development that reduce societal strife and stress, as well as the adverse effects of commerce on the environment.

The U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development, in a book entitled *Our Common Future* (1987), articulated a broader meaning of sustainability. It defined sustainability as the ability of the present generation to meet its needs without compromising the needs of future generations. In addition, other definitions of sustainability give emphasis to efforts toward regeneration and the harmonious co-existence of all forms of life.

The Triple Bottom Line

The “triple bottom line” concept is often used by change agents (people devoted to sustainability) in articulating vital sustainability strategies. It focuses not only on economic aspects, like profitability and financial performance, but on the social and environmental results as well. This concept is a great improvement over the limitations of a purely financial viewpoint.

■ Creating Positive Futures in an Interdependent World

Human development will not come about because of some government decrees

or some changes in the ways businesses operate. To produce the necessary changes and to initiate a postindustrial renaissance, new ideas, connections, and social networks are needed. This will only happen when a diverse and diffused critical mass of people and organizations decide to live and act differently.

Learning to See Through the Alieness

It is common for people to think and identify themselves in terms of families, tribes, religions, race, countries, and nation-states. For this reason, few are ready to serve a truly global society and accept global citizenship. Consequently, organizations are also conditioned to have this same self-interested focus.

Unless, people start to see beyond this sometimes myopic view of life, efforts toward developing strategies for sustainability will fail if people do not change how they see themselves in relation to the rest of the world. Thus, it is important for societies and their representative institutions to recognize and appreciate their kinship and interdependence.

To do this, societies must see and understand the connection between human consciousness and the physical world. They must create more inclusive and integrated ways of living and working. For instance, businesses that make this crucial change in their corporate goals will start to see themselves more as living organizations, than as money-producing machines. In turn, they will start to understand nature deeply and live in accord with its teachings, which will encourage them to adopt more responsible business practices.

■ Engaging in Effective Sustainability Discussions

To be effective, sustainability discussions require planning. Engage key decision makers in discussions that will be relevant to the commercial viability and economic sustainability of the company. Make sure that any business strategy that incorporates sustainability must improve the quality and capacity of the executive team to think farther about the future.

Do not engage them in forceful discussions that ask for immediate and large-scale changes in the way the company operates. However, it is still possible for emotions to run high during these exploratory discussions. The important thing is for everyone, especially the facilitators, to channel these emotional tensions into more positive outlets.

Furthermore, these exploratory discussions about the future will enhance the confidence of the executive team in dealing with such uncertainties. Consequently, it will also create a more positive and more holistic vision for the whole company.

Tips in Successful Sustainability Discussions

— Step One: Seeing Past the Big Bets An initial conversation

Set aside quality time for exploratory meetings. Propose that such meetings are part of the planning cycle and ensure that benefits to company are clearly articulated.

In addition, enlist the support of unbiased, credible members of the team who are not directly involved in the advocacy. These people can facilitate discussions and help ensure that the topics discussed are broad enough to be relevant to the entire team.

—Moreover, encourage each member of the team to look beyond specific and narrow predictions of the future. Engage them in conversations that will take into consideration other possible futures and assumptions. This will ensure that a truly generative inquiry about the company's future is accomplished.

— Step Two: Identifying driving forces

Identify key driving forces that affect assumptions made about the business, such as scientific opinions and public attitudes and perceptions. Make a full list of these driving forces and carefully explore each one. Next, categorize them according to their respective degrees of impact and determine which outcomes will most likely happen and which outcomes are highly uncertain. Finally, develop plans in accord with those outcomes.

— Step Three: Creating Scenarios

Create scenarios that will accurately depict the possible outcomes of those various assumptions. This will allow the team to imagine how those multiple driving forces may affect the company's future. This will also enable the team to see the systemic interdependencies between events and forces that may occur.

■ Sustainability in Action

Effecting systems change and incorporating corporate responsibility and sustainability principles into the heart of a business is a slow and difficult process. At times, it can be frustrating. Despite the challenges, great strides are being made by people and organizations towards making sustainability goals a reality.

Materials Pooling: The Next Industrial Vision

Materials pooling is a multi-industry, collaborative project that seeks ways of reducing or eliminating toxicity and waste altogether. It involves creation of common goals and team learning. This series of activities provide opportunities for innovation and environmental improvements across industries.

One such endeavor was initiated by a diverse group of companies in 2001. Facilitated by the SoL Sustainability Consortium and the Rocky Mountain Institute, companies such as Nike, Ford, BP, Unilever, Harley-Davidson, Hewlett-Packard, Plug Power, Aveda, Sikorsky, Pratt & Whitney, Visteon, and about 20 components and raw materials suppliers, engaged in exploratory talks about possible ways of sustainably managing raw materials flow in the manufacturing industry.

The SEED Program

The Schlumberger Excellence in Educational Development (SEED) Program is a non-profit organization, under the auspices of Schlumberger Ltd. It uses the internet and the resources of the company to promote cross-cultural understanding, as well as provide educational workshops in science and technology to poor and remote communities in developing countries.

Built on Schlumberger's unique workforce and socially progressive culture, the SEED Program offers its employees and volunteers opportunities to give something back to society. The program has helped the people at Schlumberger realize that a company is more than just an organization for profit. It has made them see that they are also a community of people that has enormous potential to make a big difference on other people's lives.

Creative Development in Rural Africa

The Kibaale district in Western Uganda benefited from the help of the Uganda Rural Development and Training (URDT) Program. With the help and guidance of URDT, the people of Kibaale gradually climbed out from the life-draining poverty trap that they once found themselves in.

By applying vision-based and holistic organizational learning and systems thinking, URDT was able to help the people of Kibaale understand that the key to their own development lay in their own hands. They encouraged people to become self-reliant and taught them how to bridge the gap between their current reality and their vision for the future.

This enabled the Kibaale community to build local-income producing enterprises and become less dependent on grants and aids that did not really help them on a long-term basis. As URDT's Development Philosophy espouses:

Nike's Internal Environmental Activist

Concerns about the environment and changing consumer choices prompted Nike to re-evaluate their corporate goals. However, it took Nike some time before its senior management was able to fully adopt sustainability principles into its corporate culture.

Nike formed its environmental action team, aptly named the Nike Environmental Action Team (NEAT), to examine environmental issues relevant to the company. It focused initially on programs on waste management and regulatory compliance.

Afterwards, Nike began collaborative initiatives with other industries to tackle global issues, such as climate change and factory conditions. They engaged in strategic planning, design and development, community investments, as well as environmental and labor, and health and safety compliance.

Reebok and Human Rights

Reebok is the first athletic footwear company that developed a code of conduct for its subcontractor factories. They did this in response to the poor treatment that overseas workers in other multinational companies were experiencing. As a global brand, they realized that they were in a good position to do something positive about the human rights issue.

This and other related incidents motivated Reebok to re-examine their business practices and re-consider their obligation to the workers who made their shoes. They sought ways on how to improve the labor standards in their overseas factories. The result- - the Reebok Human Rights Production Standards.

Reebok also formed a human rights team to educate factories and trading agents about their labor standards. This enabled the management teams at these various factories to monitor themselves. In addition, Reebok introduced more comprehensive compliance benchmarks for its subcontractors.

■ Sustainability: The Inner and Outer Work

The “triple bottom line” concept has proven insufficient in developing truly sustainable organizations, practices, and communities. On one hand, this is due to the inability of most people to create a real synergy among its three (3) dimensions, namely the social, economic, and ecological dimensions. In addition, the “triple bottom line” concept often ignores the “inner work” of sustainability initiatives the personal practices and disciplines that provide perspective and internal stability.

However, be careful. The same motivations that drive people to work toward sustainability may also drive these people into frenzied cycle of “fixes”, acts, and imperatives. To prevent this, cultivate a broader awareness of sustainability work and abide by a regular contemplative practice.

Deeper Awareness of the Connection of all Life

Awareness of the underlying interconnectedness of life leads to a greater sense

of responsibility. When people realize this, they will begin to see that their lives are interconnected with all life on Earth. Gradually, they will also begin to realize that their actions, no matter how big or small, affect larger systems and other people's lives.

Creative Tension

Awareness of this interconnection, will lead people to wish for a better quality of life and equity for all people on Earth. At the same time, people will begin to be more aware and sensitive to the problems around them.

This will lead them to recognize more deeply the gap between the “world as it is” and the “world as it could be.” Strong awareness of this gap will either lead other people to deny and despair about these problems; or, this may lead people to take action to bridge the gap for others and for life in general.

Coherence of Action

As people's capability and awareness expand, they choose to do things that are more in line with the aspirations of a truly integrated “triple bottom line” initiative. This will produce a wide variety of actions and responses, which take into account the well-being of others. This naturally leads people to want to make sense of those varied responses. In turn, this increases the value of the contemplative state.

Reflection and Contemplation

Contemplation is a crucial part of this cycle. Engaging in some personal contemplative practice will sharpen people's ability to see their current reality and act accordingly to their aspirations. In turn, as personal consciousness increase, so does a person's innate awareness of the interconnection of all life.

■ The Role of Emotions

Oftentimes, corporations have developed a stoic resistance to emotions. However, emotions play a critical role in organizational life. It can provide an important source of initial energy and insight for any action-oriented process. Moreover, making it more pronounced can be very useful.

For instance, emotions can provide feedback and serve as a measuring stick. If people feel angry, injustice may be present in the system; or if there is joy, there is a good chance that the people running the system are doing a good job.

People need to increase their capacity to understand and interpret emotional systems. However, this will require commitment, as well as time and attention. As people become more committed to sustainability work, they will gain a deeper

understanding of their own emotional energy and their ability for contemplation. Furthermore, as their skill, intelligence, and heart for working in these domains increase, so does their capacity to become a wise, compassionate, and effective leader.

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