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Sustainability Leadership
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04/27/2016

Pulling up to Southface's main office, it's quite clear that the non-profit draws from southern roots. An entire half of the office has been built from an old home, with a wooden deck and patio furniture, eloquently communicating ideals of "southern hospitality" when juxtaposed by the more urban neighboring buildings in Midtown Atlanta. This is only further reinforced by sitting down with Dennis Creech, Southface's executive director, who hails from Charleston, South Carolina.

Dennis is very much a product of the 60s, evidenced not only by his many adages and sayings that he effortlessly weaves into conversation, but by his emphasis on inclusivity and servant leadership. "I'm not that smart," Dennis confesses, "but I recognize good ideas." He argues that an effective leader is one who can listen to ideas from a variety of spectrums, synthesize the information, and motivate a team to follow a particular vision. A leader is just as much a part of the team as anyone else, he explains; including everyone in the pursuit of the common goal should be the mission of every leader. "Motivating ten people to row is much more effective than having one good rower."

Dennis also believes that the culture of any organization trumps strategy any day. It is no wonder then that Southface strives to create a community among its staff to push one another to work harder and achieve greater. The same happens outside of the office walls as well; Dennis takes pride in Southface's ability to initiate conversation and collaboration between the network of non-profits, government entities, and locally based business around Atlanta. Although Southface focuses on several different areas tied to sustainability, their main target is building codes and construction standards. Southface seeks to promote sustainable homes, workplaces, and communities in order to address issues related to energy and water efficiency. Purposefully or not, southern hospitality permeates this organization like a consistent blast of cool air-conditioning through an energy-star approved HVAC system.

Although Southface collaborates with Atlanta's government to help update and advise on restructuring energy and building codes, their main effort to promote the growth of sustainable building has been through creating and maintaining an accreditation program: EarthCraft. Similar the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED program or the Living Future Institutes' Living Building Challenge, two building performance standards that evaluate and offer certifications, this program features criteria for energy and water usage. If the building meets these criteria, it will receive the cost benefits of efficient utilities as well as a sustainable accreditation: an increasingly sought after title.

While the gap between the baseline efficiency requirements set by government laws and regulations and the standards met by EarthCraft's program was very noticeable, time has slowly drawing this gap to a point where paying for EarthCraft is not an quick

and easy choice. The progress of technology has made it so that energy and water efficient utilities are much more widespread, meaning new construction projects are much more likely to meet the standards set by the government. Even though Southface has remained steadfast, consistently updating the EarthCraft requirements to keep pace with technology and government standards, they see the mainstream demand for the program steadily dwindling. Change is coming to Southface, Dennis predicts. This is true in more ways than one: Dennis recently announced his resignation as Executive Director, leaving the future of SouthFace even more shrouded in uncertainty. Dennis is confident in the organization's ability to respond to this adversity. "SouthFace has always dealt with change," he explains. "Change is constant, but the rate of change is not."

Back in the 1990's, the housing market was largely dominated by the National Home Buyer's Alliance (NHBA), an organization with a powerful lobbying group that fought the EPA's newly introduced green building standards. These new requirements took root in Austin, Texas and required additional work from contractors and builders, which would result in higher cost, higher home prices, and swarms of builders worried they might drive demand for homes down. The NHBA was opposed to any sort of energy efficiency program that required action on the part of the builders. At that time, trying to tell builders to abide by energy efficient regulations was like telling a child to "eat their vegetables" according to Dennis.

Back in Atlanta, Dennis and SouthFace were watching the battle between the EPA and the NHBA very closely. They were interested in breaking into the housing industry to implement energy efficient practices since that's how Dennis believed energy and water management would be best addressed. Dennis' conservation mantra is centered upon the idea that humans spend the majority of their lives in buildings; it's a fact. So, if we as a society are going to address issues of energy and water usage, then it's simply common sense to build buildings that use less of those resources.

SouthFace saw that the EPA was onto this too, but they both knew of the hostility of the NHBA. Fortunately, as Dennis puts it, "sometimes you just get lucky." As they followed the EPA's introduction of building standards, the Home Builder's Association (HBA) in Atlanta had recently elected a new president who possessed much more progressive outlook on sustainability and building programs. Atlanta was notorious for its poor construction standards, and Dennis reasoned that the development of "green buildings" would allow for good press on the builders' side.

Admittedly deriving much of its program from the EPA's experiment in Austin, SouthFace decided to meet and work with the HBA in Atlanta to form a new certification program together. That collaboration was essential so that the builders had just as much input as the environmentally conscious SouthFace did since they needed the builders to want to implement this program. It had to be a joint effort, and it needed to appeal to the builders. For instance, the term "green" could not be anywhere in the new program. At the time, green conveyed an idea of "novice." It was a poor choice of

rhetoric for activating the community of builders and construction workers. Thus, SouthFace's new "green building" program became known as EarthCraft.

In 1999, the first year EarthCraft was deployed, eight buildings sites featured the EarthCraft program. As of this past year, a totally of over 45,000 sites were EarthCraft certified. Clearly, several changes in the building environment occurred. Builders' associations became much more interested in green building programs as consumers' demand for the same programs grew. Furthermore, the societal "green tide" also started to form as a larger swath of people became more active and environmentally conscious. Government policies also reflected this trend, steadily increasing efficiency requirements in municipal building codes. All this time, SouthFace remained active in their work, updating the EarthCraft program to stay one step ahead of the curve.

Dennis explains continually updating the program purposefully done to appeal to the mainstream buyer and builder. He sees programs like the Living Building challenge as amazing, innovative approaches to building standards, but they're too luxurious to make a tangible impact. He argues that by making EarthCraft friendly and affordable, it can appeal to a wide audience, allowing for green buildings to proliferate and have a larger footprint of efficiency. With this philosophy, SouthFace assumes the role of a Change Agent as described by Alan AtKisson in his "Ameoba of Culture" theory on innovation (AtKisson 1999:181-183). Although they are not the original innovators coming up with new energy efficient designs or technologies, they are able to translate the benefits of these innovations and bring a larger percentage of the population on board with the change. The low cost of the EarthCraft program also allows for it to be implemented in affordable housing projects, facilitating the growth of clean, comfortable, and sustainable living environments to be built in less fortunate areas of Atlanta. By doing so, SouthFace effectively hits all three pillars of sustainability – a point that Dennis likes to emphasize. As much as SouthFace wants to make a program that will spread like wildfire to the rest of the country and appeal to mainstream builders, creating a program that can be easily implemented for impoverished communities also resonates with the organization's values.

This is an important note considering the recent lull in EarthCraft's accreditations. Although there are fluctuations over time in the number of EarthCraft certified homes each year, normally coinciding with changes and updates in the building code, Dennis explains that the demand for green buildings in the past five years or so has declined. He attributes this slump to the recession and its impact in the housing market; however, he also believes builders are becoming progressively more obstinate. Originally, the best method that SouthFace found to convince builders and contractors to adopt the EarthCraft certification was to appeal to their wallets. Dollars and cents is ultimately the bottom line for constructors, and so SouthFace's job, especially near the inception of the EarthCraft, was to make the logical case for adopting the program. Dennis tells that it was a "hard sell" to show constructors that past the hefty, upfront cost existed long term savings in the reduced energy and water usage. However, with the proliferation of cheap technology, sustainable products are becoming a common commodity.

Whereas a water efficient dishwasher was quickly looked over for another, less sustainable model ten years ago, the efficient utility is now suddenly just as affordable as its clunkier competitor. Added to the eventual savings earned by using less water or electricity, choosing sustainable products became a no-brainer. As consumers began to follow these choices on their own, Dennis noticed builders trying to create their own “green building program.” He says that there is an increasing trend of builders who independently label their project a “green building,” when in reality the building contains only a few energy efficient items.

The fact that SouthFace had to create tension in the constructors using a pure economic appeal seems to challenge Bob Doepplt’s theory on creating tension (Doepplt 2008: 70-80). Tension, he explains, is the driving force behind people changing their behavior and originates from a gap between a person’s “deeply held values and beliefs” and their “current thinking and behavior.” Doepplt goes on to suggest that generating tension must be done through tapping into people’s inner most values and emotions, not logic.

However, in SouthFace’s case, is this what happened? It could be argued that they successfully used the contractors’ value of cost-effectiveness to move them towards the EarthCraft program, but this parallels the sort of culture change described in Bill McKibben’s case study *Power to the People* (McKibben 2015: 30-31, 35). By describing the increasing amount of energy efficient renovations to homes, McKibben reveals that the choice for families to make more sustainable choices, especially with regard to their home, does not come from a desire to combat climate change. They chose energy efficient appliances because it drastically reduced their utilities bill every month.

SouthFace did not try to convince the builders by making the “environmentally conscious argument.” In fact, Dennis said they actively avoided it. That sort of rhetoric did not resonate with that particular community, and so over time, as energy efficient technology became more widespread and affordable, and as government building codes became stricter, the economic appeal started to vanish. If buildings were intrinsically required to be fairly energy efficient, why would builders want to pay more just to be a tiny bit more efficient and get a gold star? Where did that gold star derive its worth?

And here is where Dennis said the emotional connection to sustainability came into play. He found that the builders with whom SouthFace developed long, meaningful relationships with grew to care deeply about the environmental aspect of the EarthCraft program. Over time, this community was much more likely to respond positively to the “green” type of language that SouthFace had to avoid initially. The change in the builders’ view towards sustainable design is reflective of Robert Quinn’s model on incremental vs deep change in his book Deep Change (Quinn 1996: 3-10). Quinn describes how incremental change is something “we are in control of,” whereas deep change “requires new ways of thinking and behavior.” At first, SouthFace asked the constructors to use their preferred method of thinking. Approach this offer like you would any other, they asked, and see that there are tangible benefits. The secondary benefit

of winning over greater and greater numbers of contractors is that, even though they weren't aware of it, they were promoting sustainable choices before ultimately, they had immersed themselves long enough in that new method of thinking that they had grown accustomed to it. Or rather, until something prompted them to reconsider their values, only to find a brand new environmental consciousness that sprouted inside of them.

For many of the builders, this came as SouthFace approached them for help. As the number of EarthCraft projects began to decline while building standards rose in the late 2000's, SouthFace decided to test the trust they felt they won over in the builders. SouthFace created a Technical Assistant program where they would teach builders and contractors about sustainable building features and utilities while also providing them with an accreditation that would allow them to perform checks on building sites when it came time to approve or deny a project the EarthCraft certification. The idea was that the TAs would serve as marketers, bouncing from project to project telling others about and effectively advertising the EarthCraft program. By doing so, SouthFace hoped they could simply manage the program.

Unfortunately, the program did not work as expected. The TAs did market the program, but because the responsibility of testing construction sites to see if they met the EarthCraft requirements now extended beyond SouthFace's staff, they were saddened to find cheating occurring during the testing. Dennis believes this is because the TAs were not as "mission driven" as the SouthFace staff. Like the constructors that SouthFace had to sell the EarthCraft program to, many of the TAs did not care about promoting sustainability or energy efficiency; they simply wanted to earn a bit more cash.

But the failure of SouthFace's TA program will not be their undoing. Dennis explains that they are currently in the process of determining other ways to market the EarthCraft programs, one of which includes the possibility of creating an EarthCraft "premium" option. Although he is somewhat skeptical of this option, as it might alienate mainstream builders, Dennis believes this might have the same effect that Apple created with their brand. By marketing the EarthCraft program as a marvel of sustainable design, perhaps SouthFace can capitalize on the growing "Green Tide" that's sweeping through the world. However, Dennis believes SouthFace must not stray too far from its mission; the task of providing options for affordable housing must remain.

Sticking with Dennis' philosophy, SouthFace is undergoing a period of much greater change at the moment, especially considering Dennis' upcoming departure. His absence will mark the first change in leadership at the company, which was founded in 1978. Although one might argue that this type of change is poorly timed, Dennis thinks it's appropriate. "It's evolution," he claims, describing the changes that SouthFace has undergone. "It's a long, continual process that occasionally has a more sudden jerk." He is confident that whoever will succeed him will have the vision to guide the organization through these more turbulent times. After his time as executive director, he has left the organization with a foundation of values that will support its efforts into the future. "If you

have the right values, you will come up with the mission and vision.” Like he explained before, “culture trumps strategy.”

Even culture is subject to change though. As EarthCraft has waxed and waned in its popularity, the greater Atlanta community has undergone a subtle transformation. Sustainability is slowly becoming a cornerstone of the city, partly evidenced by the growing number of contractors buying into SouthFace’s environmental message. SouthFace has also found support from the city government, with Mayor Kasim Reed creating the Office of Sustainability in 2010. Considering this, the survival of the EarthCraft program almost doesn’t matter. Atlanta and the southeast region has shown it’s ability to grown and respond to the increasing need for sustainability. This was no doubt thanks to the EarthCraft program and the work of SouthFace, but what comes next for the region will be whole dependent on whether or not the community believes it still needs the EarthCraft program.

Perhaps it’s for the best that Atlanta decides that it doesn’t. Maybe the end of the program poetically predicts the beginning of another stage in Atlanta’s evolution; a stage where sustainability now inhabits a larger portion of the minds of its citizens. If that’s the case, one can rest assured that SouthFace will respond with an evolution of its own – it’s in its DNA.

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