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Sustainability and the need for change: organisational change and transformational vision

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

The need for  
change

# Sustainability and the need for change: organisational change and transformational vision

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to provide an introduction to the special issue on the theme of sustainability and the need for change.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper gives an overview of sustainability and its managerial and policy dilemmas for organizations. It also outlines the topics covered in the papers in the special issue.

**Findings** – The question that the papers seek to answer is: how can organisations deal with the sustainability challenge? The papers cover the key sustainability dilemmas: how to balance short term priorities with long term vision, organisational change with stability, strategic goals with day to day implementation, domestic with international responsibilities; how to manage the corporate brand, image and reputation; how to influence policies nationally and internationally, and foster relations, all in the realm of effecting the change in attitude and behaviour that sustainability demands.

**Originality/value** – The paper introduces an eclectic collection of papers that are intended to inform, challenge and stimulate continuing debate.

**Keywords** Sustainable development, Organizations, Change management, Business policy

**Paper type** General review

The Special Issue of *JOCM* in front of you marks a timely recognition of previously neglected implementation aspects of the sustainability agenda in organisations.

The history of the concept of “Sustainability” can be traced to the environmental movement which began to have influence in the 1960s. As environmental exploitation by corporations was highlighted by activist groups, consumer and social issues became associated with concerns of the impact of traditional business models on our global ecology. The first international conference to address the issue was in Stockholm, the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment. A decade later, in 1983, the World Commission on Environment and Development was put together by the UN, chaired by the then Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. The Commission produced its report in 1987 and put forward the now generally accepted definition of sustainable development (WCED, 1987): “Progress that meets the needs of



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the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

It is often not immediately obvious how radical a definition this is – there was then, and still is, a “present” in which the very basic needs of billions of people are unmet, and continue to be so. Academics too notice this: “Political, social, commercial, and environmental trends are producing demographic change, globalisation, shifts in the centres of economic power to include emerging markets, climate change and ecosystem degradation. Critically we see differentials in quality of life and resource scarcity” (Maak and Pless, 2009).

It is now accepted that unintended social, environmental, and economic consequences of rapid population growth, economic growth, consumption of our natural resources and commercial activity are as much a concern for businesses as they are for governments. The narrative of “sustainable development” is increasingly being adopted by organisations as a framework to address these issues and guide our political, commercial and personal responses. McKinsey and others cite sustainability as one of the major forces that will reshape and define our world in the coming era (Bonini *et al.*, 2010).

Maak and Pless (2009) stated that alongside the global trends they identify, the world is becoming increasingly connected and interdependent and it is clear that the world’s most pressing public problems such as poverty or global warming call for cross-sector solutions. They also suggest that business leaders should develop as agents of world benefit, taking an active co-responsibility in generating solutions to problems. The argument is that we need responsible global leaders who are aware of the pressing problems in the world, care for the needs of others, aspire to make this world a better place, and act in word and deed as global and responsible citizens. Indeed, there is also a growing willingness among business leaders to devote time, expertise and resources to helping seek solutions for pressing global problems.

Ten years ago, CEOs tended to argue that following the principles of sustainability added nothing but cost to their business (Gitsham *et al.*, 2009). Now the situation is radically different, as business leaders increasingly refer to sustainability as one of the lynchpins of competition within their sector, and a significant source of both opportunity for, and risk to, long term competitive advantage. Many executives now acknowledge that the way they respond to the challenge of sustainability will affect their business competitiveness and the future of their company (Lubin and Esty, 2010).

The 2010 United Nations Global Compact-Accenture CEO study (UN Global Compact and Accenture, 2010) found that 93 per cent of CEOs now believe sustainability will be critical to the future success of their companies. A critical mass of business leaders, 80 per cent, believes a tipping point will be reached within the next 15 years when sustainability will be automatically embedded in the core business and strategies of most companies, and 54 per cent believe this tipping point could be reached within the next ten years. There is thus a significant shift in thinking – with profound implications for questions of organisational purpose, strategy, brand, competence and culture – globally.

Although thinking has matured to a point where approaches to sustainability have converged around the common agenda of social, economic and environmental issues it is acknowledged that every sector, even individual companies, has unique and specific priorities. In addition, the conviction of CEOs that sustainability needs to be addressed,

does not guarantee that they will or can take effective steps to integrate the necessary behaviours within their organisations. For example, using the concept of “stickiness” to examine knowledge transfer within organisations, Szulanski (2000) and others (Jensen and Szulanski, 2004) have described how implementation does not always follow intent.

Whilst there is a substantial literature on technical issues of sustainability, there has been considerably less research into the integration of thinking into models and policies for organisations, business and government. Much more clarity is needed on how organizations must change to meet the sustainability challenge, and how the necessary changes may be achieved. We must consider how the academic and practitioner body engaged in sustainability can move the business agenda forward. We need further understanding of how Board and management attitudes and behaviour can become “aligned” and how the corporate brand proposition can enshrine or embody sustainable development. Research needs to address issues such as how MNCs see and practise their role in a global environment in which sustainability is becoming mandatory, how overall policies of governments, businesses and the third sector can be influenced and how they can be made to “dare to care” (Tsui, 2009)) as well as fulfil strategic objectives. But research also needs to address SMEs and indeed the public sector. The experiences, and perceptions, of this broader organisational spectrum of implementing sustainability practices are largely unexplored and merit further investigation.

Implementation and organizational change are the key issues the sustainability agenda is demanding action on. This requires a change of thinking, a change of attitude that usually needs to start with leadership. Slowly a body of knowledge has begun to be created about the implications for leadership of the need to address these issues. For example, Goehrig (2008) has pointed out the role of leadership in creating a sustainable and realistic business environment. He states that to change the business outcome requires changes to existing business structures and highlights the need for the executives, consultants and management leaders to understand and implement new strategies.

More generally, Doppelt (2003) stated that “For an organisation to make the kind of transformation to become truly sustainable, power and authority must be skilfully distributed amongst employees and stakeholders through effective information sharing, decision making and resource allocation mechanisms”. This is clearly an issue for the leaders of organisations.

Hind *et al.* (2009) have argued that sustainable businesses need leaders who are pro-actively aware of their social and environmental responsibilities as well as their financial ones. It is suggested that for the development of “responsible” leadership the intellectual capacities of reflection, synthesis and integration of local and global business information must be fostered. This needs to lead to a new interpretation of both factual and emotional data. If these skills can be developed, they may enable leaders to develop new ways of thinking and new business models which will contribute to the sustainability of their businesses.

We want to take this further and suggest leaders not only need to have vision, but also need to ensure that all steps that are required for this vision to become a reality are taken. This will involve the setting of priorities, compromise, and choice.

Some generic steps for increasing a company's sustainability advantage have already been suggested. Rigby and Tager (2008) propose that to create sustainable organizations, leaders must:

- determine a vision for the company;
- assess the existing operations of the company;
- maximize growth opportunities; and
- measure outcomes to determine the company's level of success.

A key finding (Branzei *et al.*, 2000) is that the higher the corporate environmental commitment of leaders, the more likely their choice of following a proactive strategy and subsequent environmental innovation. They conclude that eco-sustainable management depends on the continued personal and corporate commitment of leaders toward the environment, enacted in proactive strategy choices and the pursuit of environmental innovation.

This "continued personal and corporate commitment of leaders" has profound implications for questions of organisational purpose, strategy, brand, core competence and culture. Business leaders must re-examine their organisations closely, asking – or perhaps returning to questions, which may once have seemed settled but now lead to new and challenging interpretations of such issues as:

- What is our organisation for?
- How do we add value and how will this change?
- What do we stand for in the eyes of our customers, the wider public and other key stakeholders?
- What are we good at, are there new ways to leverage this, or will it need to change?
- Do we have the right capabilities and culture to keep pace with and take advantage of this changing context?
- What are the most effective approaches to organisational learning and change that will keep us fit for and able to lead in the age of sustainability?
- How will the need for change of the sustainability agenda change our organisations?
- How can we and will we change our organisations?

We believe that leaders who lead sustainable companies will be those who explicitly drive sustainability into their business practices and strategies; this goes far beyond donating to good causes or "greenwashing" operations, and it really means breaking the template of Business As Usual. The best leaders will not only transform their own businesses but will have the vision to change attitudes and mindsets in their industries. They will have impact on their employees, their consumers, on policymakers and on society at large.

And Ceasar and Stubbings (2012) outline some of the effective change practices that organisations with the right leadership are already adopting to respond strategically to the trends, and introduce a framework for others seeking to join them. Their change model represents strategic change as a dynamic concept that dissolves the

internal/external boundary of traditional change approaches. The assumption is that if one is to take the long-term success of organisations seriously one needs to take a more inclusive and integrated perspective on change.

This special issue consists of some strong academic papers and papers focusing on real managerial and policy dilemmas and solutions. It should foster a dialogue among academics, policy researchers, and corporate executives on the challenges inherent in dealing with the sustainability agenda within a variety of organizations.

The fundamental question we set out to answer in this Special Issue was: How can organisations deal with the sustainability challenge? This covers the key sustainability dilemmas: how to balance short term priorities with long term vision, organisational change with stability, strategic goals with day to day implementation, domestic with international responsibilities; how to manage the corporate brand, image and reputation; how to influence policies nationally and internationally, foster relations, all in the realm of effecting the change in attitude and behaviour that sustainability demands. Though the area is too wide to give all the answers, undoubtedly, some pointers to the answers are given in the papers following – an eclectic collection we deliberately selected from a wide field of submissions. The resulting six research papers and four conceptual papers is intended to inform but particularly to challenge and also to stimulate continuing debate.

After the current article, the order of papers for this Special Issue is as follows:

- (1) Driving factors:
  - Sustainability at all levels is imperative, so, what needs to change?
  - Top management influence is important, so, what needs to change?
- (2) Change agents for embedding sustainability practices:
  - a ten-year study on the role of change agents; and
  - how leaders design and engage in sustainability initiatives.
- (3) How to change for sustainability:
  - through an interaction and networks approach (INA); and
  - looking at micro-moments and the importance of individual impact.
- (4) Application to specific sectors:
  - the public sector; and
  - universities.

Anne Stoughton and James Ludema start off the Special Issue with a paper examining “The driving factors of sustainability” taking as a starting premise that numerous companies are accepting sustainability as an organizational imperative but there is, as yet, little convergence of view on how organizations become sustainable. Their research attempts to provide further insight into how sustainability emerges within organizations. Specifically, employees from three companies with exemplary sustainability standings were asked to share their stories about the sustainability projects they had contributed to. The results, in conjunction with company documents, were used to address the question, “how are sustainability initiatives developed and implemented within organizations?”



The results revealed that different views and perspectives on sustainability existed at different levels within each of the studied organizations. At the organizational level, sustainability was defined and an integrated view of sustainability was promoted throughout the company. While this view of sustainability dominated discourse in the companies, differentiated viewpoints on sustainability also existed at the organizations' functional levels. At the individual level, differences in education, culture, and other factors influenced facility, supplier, and employee perspectives on sustainability. This research provides insight into the complexity of sustainability perspectives within organisations. It highlights the importance of the vertical integration of a sustainability philosophy within a company and the supporting practices necessary to embed that philosophy. Crucially, the role of the leadership in infusing the sustainability culture is emphasised. Leaders made their commitment explicit in communications, in adopting reporting frameworks and by prioritising issues, which provided a framework for sustainability policies. This top down management involvement was crucial, but the paper found that influence from the middle of the organisation was equally important. Middle management needed to adopt new ways of thinking and behaving in order to operationalise senior management vision. Thirdly, at the more micro level, individuals need to adopt and internalise the new practices in order to make them effective. This holistic web of power and influence is how sustainability change happens.

Acknowledging the importance and influence of top management teams on the implementation of sustainability practices, Helene Cherrier, Sally Russell and Kelly Fielding have made an innovative contribution based on examining the narratives and identities around sustainability adopted by a small sample of managers

The aim of the research was to examine the narratives of acceptance and resistance to the introduction of corporate environmentalism. Despite recognition that managers and senior executives play a primary role in corporate environmentalism, relatively few researchers have examined how top management supports, accepts, negotiates, disregards, or rejects the implementation of corporate environmentalism within their organization. By considering how members of a top management team reflect on corporate environmentalism the study aimed to examine potential identity management conflicts that arise during the implementation of environmentally sustainable initiatives within organizations.

The research adopted a qualitative approach examining the lived experience of participants as they internalized corporate environmentalism as part of their identity and as part of the organizational identity. Data collection involved 15 semi-structured interviews with senior executives and board members of a large Australian hospital.

Based on an in-depth thematic analysis of interview transcripts individuals were found to attribute a dominant discourse to corporate environmentalism based on their experience of organizational change for sustainability. Six dominant discourses were identified. Three of these were resistant to corporate environmentalism:

- (1) the pragmatist;
- (2) the traditionalist; and
- (3) the observer;

and three were supportive of corporate environmentalism:

- 
- (1) the techno centrist;
  - (2) holist; and
  - (3) ecopreneur.

The findings demonstrate that although participants operated in and experienced the same organizational context, the narratives and identities they constructed in relation to sustainability varied widely. Understanding the ways in which management may embrace or resist sustainable development emphasizes the challenges inherent in developing an organizational identity that incorporates sustainability principles and the need for change management strategies to appeal to the diverse values and priorities of organizational managers and executives. The paper highlights the fact that concepts of sustainability are still diverse, and corporate recognition is patchy even within committed organisations.

Turning to a close analysis of the role of change agents in embedding sustainability practices Angela van der Heijden, Jacqueline Cramer and Peter Driessen examined sustainability sense making in the Dutch subsidiary of the US-based carpet tiles manufacturer Interface from a change agent perspective. Uniquely they did so over a period of ten years (2000-2010). The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how change agent sense making gave rise to the embedding of corporate sustainability, and reflect on the long-term trends and effects. Employing a longitudinal case study design, the experiences of members of the organisation in initiating and intermediating sustainable change efforts in the Dutch subsidiary of Interface were examined. The qualitative methods included data collection through individual and group interviews, feedback verification and time-ordered data analysis.

The findings show the initiatives undertaken by the change agents in the subsidiary, how their efforts evolved, and how they perceived the effectiveness of their efforts. Two trends of change agent sense making for sustainability were identified: a downward trend followed by an upward trend. The downward trend was a response to the imposition of an “alien” sustainability framework encompassing language and organisational structures – the sense making within the organisation was not shared or communal. The upward trend followed adaptation and customisation of the frameworks to literally “make sense” in the specific and unique organisation involved. Once again, we are reminded of the fact that there is no “one size fits all” approach to sustainability within organisations.

This work provides understanding of the sense making efforts that change agents engage in, as well as clues and ideas that practitioners could use to guide emergent aspects of implementing sustainability. The barriers to implementation seem to be rooted in personal cognitive frameworks, supporting the argument that real change needs to be rooted in personal value systems.

The research emphasises the importance of internal change agents in sustainability implementation and draws attention to practical applications of sense making theory. Importantly this study also demonstrates that recognizing the emergent aspects of change processes can be a complementary approach to the more traditional planned perspectives.

Leaders obviously can fulfil the role of change agents and in the next paper Barrett Brown examines how organizational leaders, particularly those individuals with highly-developed meaning-making cognitive systems, design and engage in



sustainability initiatives. The paper offers an initial exploration of what leader development programmes may need to focus on in order to cultivate leadership with the capacity to address very complex social, economic, and environmental challenges

A sample of sustainability leaders and change agents who were identified as holding the three rarest and most complex action logic systems were interviewed to explore how they design and engage in sustainability initiatives. The findings indicated that those leaders appear to:

- design from a deep inner foundation, including grounding their work in transpersonal meaning;
- access non-rational ways of knowing, and use systems, complexity, and integral theories; and
- adaptively manage through “dialogue” with the system, three distinct roles, and developmental practices.

Fifteen leadership competencies that are largely new to the leadership literature and relate to complex meaning making systems were identified, as were developmental stage distinctions for three dimensions of leadership.

The paper argues that more complex meaning making systems are correlated with greater leadership effectiveness, implying that developing leaders for sustainability should focus on developing meaning making capacity. Should further research support these concepts empirically, the implications for leadership development would be profound.

We progress the collection with two papers on the specifics of “how to change”. Building on the importance of “change agent power” but moving from differences in concepts of sustainability in organisations, Annmarie Ryan, Ingrid Kajzer Mitchell and Sofia Daskou explore the implementation of the changes needed in organisations to promote sustainability practices. Their premise is that large scale systemic change cannot occur in isolation, but is more a collaborative endeavour where a critical mass of individuals, groups and organizations live and act differently. Their paper, building on the concept of “ecological literacy” illustrates how adopting an interaction and networks approach (INA) can advance the theory of organizational change for sustainability. They propose a framework which forms an invitation to situate and conceptualize change for sustainability in a more holistic context by prioritizing not only the development of relationships between stakeholders, but recognizing the specific role of learning in constructing change. Their 3-level framework incorporates system/network, dyad and firm dimensions as an alternative perspective on systemic change. The paper concludes by offering insights for managerial practice and discussing implications for future research, in particular the specific capabilities needed to perceive other stakeholders as “partners” in change.

In the next paper, the detail of change mechanisms is examined further; Peter Stokes and Phil Harris offer a caveat on organisational wide thinking.

Using participant observation, they examine the catalytic and pivotal role of interactions in micro-moments of organizational environments and their role in producing the possibility of sustainable or unsustainable change and transformation. Their findings indicate that macro-events in relation to either (un)sustainable and (ir)responsible events are, when examined more closely, commonly rooted in

“micro-moments” that are centred on behaviour and political choices. For individuals, these myriad and simultaneous choices occur many times a day.

The paper argues that consistent “good” character, which in turn produces “good” behaviour in relation to organizational conduct and relations, is central to ensuring sustainable change and transformation. Alternative “bad” character and behaviours have a propensity to engender a “Grey Zone”, of ambivalent, uncertain, environments of stasis that provide their own sustained yet paradoxically unsustainable and irresponsible environments. We see a return to earlier leadership theories, which hold that particular personality characteristics, values or beliefs are the essence of leadership influence. Values led leadership holds sway in this perspective.

The paper aims to heighten attention and awareness of seemingly “insignificant” micro-behaviour in organizations undergoing processes of constant change. If allowed to occur without redress, negative micro-moments lead to negative impacts on the macro-aspects of the organization whereas positive moments tend to engender more sustainable and responsible environments. The paper not only reminds us of the importance of individual impact in bringing about changes for sustainability, but also identifies approaches, ethics and principles that can form the basis of a response to potential tensions.

Our last two papers specifically examine two cases of the implementation of sustainability structures and policies in large-scale public organisations.

Focussing on fiscal sustainability Michel Ehrenhard, Dennis Muntslag and Celeste Wilderom look at how implementing the needed results-orientation throughout public-sector organizations remains problematic. Such implementation seems to run counter to deep-seated social structures. In this paper the authors aim to shed light via key change agents’ views on these social structures at the management level during the implementation of a results-oriented budgeting scheme.

They use both documentary data and interviews with key change agents operating within central government ministries in the Netherlands. The data was analysed using a structurational approach to identify the enablers and barriers to results-oriented budgeting implementation.

Twenty-nine social enablers and barriers to results-oriented budgeting implementation were identified. These were categorized into: “Context”, “Autonomy”, “Traditional Beliefs”, “Influence on Results”, and “Top Management Support.” These categories formed the basis for five propositions on how social structures enable and constrain results-oriented budgeting implementation among public managers.

This paper provides insight and develops knowledge on the social structures that enable and constrain results-oriented budgeting, which in turn is critical for fiscal sustainability.

Policy makers and change agents aiming to improve fiscal sustainability by budgeting reform need to consider the social structures found. Where possible they could strengthen enablers and design specific comprehensive measures to tackle the barriers identified.

We turn to the education system and sustainability development for the final paper in which David Jones examines the sustainability challenge for UK universities. Given that our universities educate our future business leaders, this paper provides a dual insight.

The paper questions whether the sustainability metrics used by universities (e.g. ISO14001 and carbon management and performance, which feed into popular, externally accredited sustainability league table criteria, are meaningful in terms of sustainability practices. The paper concludes that there is little evidence that these explicit and visible tick box criteria are radically changing behaviour towards sustainability amongst universities' stakeholders.

The research considers whether league tables promote a reified and mechanistic image of organizations that neglects human aspects and the meaning of environmental actions (Crane, 2000). Moreover, the paper conceptualises the ecological sustainability challenge for universities by arguing that current sustainability managerial agendas and narratives are underpinned by the "green washing glass cage" organizational metaphor

Controversially the paper argues that universities operate a self-serving "ecological agenda" which is in fact no more than an economic, quick-fix, piecemeal agenda and at best reduces unsustainability. The results have dramatic implications – if our universities struggle to embed real sustainability into their structures and processes, how much more difficult will it be for organisations not at the forefront of knowledge generation?

As indicated in our Call for Papers for this Special Issue, it spans a range of topics which are of concern in understanding the challenge of implementing sustainability policies:

- How can we foster organizational learning and promote change, which will keep our organizations fit and our organizational citizens creative in an age of sustainability?
- What changes of routines and procedures should be put on our organizational agendas right now, today rather than tomorrow?

The papers in the collection examined parts of all these issues; they discussed how leaders could more effectively ensure that their businesses actually implemented their proclaimed sustainability policies on how they affect people and the environment. They sought insights into business responses that develop positive impacts and minimise negative ones. They looked to see what internal processes, narratives and initiatives were needed and tried to find evidence of leaders with big ambitions to make things different and align practice with external and globally recognised benchmarks.

The papers in this Special Issue suggest that for many leaders mainstreaming sustainability is still identified as a challenge. While "motherhood & apple pie" statements regarding sustainable development are rarely challenged, integrating sustainability into organisations still appears to be very difficult.

Thus a key concern is the "implementation gap" – the need to act differently is acknowledged but not always actioned. We note that a much published research theme is still the examination of the perceived barriers to, and opportunities for, incorporating sustainability into business operations. Given that the Brundtland definition is now some 23 years old, and that evidence of the need to embrace sustainability continues to mount up, it is of great concern that organisations still do not have the concept embedded into practice even in cases where it is policy. We are still enmeshed in "challenges" and "barriers". What crises will it take for organisations to fully engage with these issues?

What role must universities and business schools play in thought leadership? We welcome the fact that some of our papers have been submitted by younger researchers relatively early in their careers. Their potential is currently high and it is to be hoped that they will in future fill the gap left by more senior colleagues who have turned their attention to other issues before the challenges of implementing sustainability have been fully explored; hopefully spending time and energy on research into sustainability from an organisational perspective will no longer be perceived as career limiting in academia.

We hope that this special issue provokes thought about how we may all work together to develop business leaders who will rethink “Business as Usual” and achieve the type of organisational change sustainability deservedly demands.

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**Further reading**

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