

## **Sustainability Leadership: Linking Theory and Practice**

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### ***Abstract***

*The paper aims to create a clearer understanding of the nature of sustainability leadership and how it can contribute to transformational change. It does this by locating sustainability within the leadership literature, defining the concept of sustainability leadership, and presenting a model of sustainability leadership in practice. The model was tested with a sample of senior business leaders and refined in line with their feedback. The model presents insights on sustainability leadership in three areas: context, individual characteristics, and actions. The model is illustrated using quotes from senior business leaders that are focused on sustainability in their organizations.*

### **Introduction**

This paper is based on research conducted by the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership (CPSL), which works with business, government and civil society to build the capacity of leaders, both to meet the needs of their stakeholders and to address critical global challenges. The paper is an attempt to create a clearer understanding of the nature of sustainability leadership and how it can contribute to transformational change.<sup>1</sup>

The Model of Sustainability Leadership that we have developed was corroborated by interviews with the following business leaders, conducted by Polly Courtice in 2010: Neil Carson, CEO of Johnson Matthey; Ian Cheshire, CEO of Kingfisher; Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric; Philippe Maso, CEO of AXA; Jan Muehlfeit, Chairman of Microsoft Europe; Truett Tate, Group Executive Director: Wholesale, for Lloyds Banking Group; José Lopez, Executive Vice President: Operations and GLOBE of Nestle; and Sandy Ogg, Chief Human Resources Officer for Unilever. The paper and the model are illustrated by extensive quotations from these interviews.

### **Definitions and Theories of Leadership**

De Vries (2001) reminds us that the Anglo-Saxon etymological root of the words *lead*, *leader* and *leadership* is *laed*, which means path or road. The verb means to travel. Thus a leader is one who shows fellow travellers the way by walking ahead. He also suggests that leadership – which focuses on the effectiveness of strategy – is different to management – which deals with the efficiency of operations.

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<sup>1</sup> Our research on sustainability leadership is also presented in the CPSL (2011) report, entitled *A Journey of a Thousand Miles: The State of Sustainability Leadership 2011*, available on [www.cpsl.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cpsl.cam.ac.uk)

Ian Cheshire (2010), CEO of Kingfisher, says “leadership is about getting people to go where they wouldn’t have gone on their own”. Rather more flamboyantly, management guru Tom Peters (1989) suggests leadership is about “discovering the passion, persistence and imagination to get results, to be able to find the Wow factor and to be able to think the weird thoughts necessary to learn and thrive in a disruptive age”.

The element of transformational change in Peters’ definition makes it particularly relevant to sustainability. We have a working definition of leadership, as follows:

*“A leader is someone who can craft a vision and inspire people to act collectively to make it happen, responding to whatever changes and challenges arise along the way.”*

In addition to definitions, there are also various theories on leadership and while it is not our intention to provide an exhaustive review of these, they do set a frame for sustainability leadership. Hence, we can distinguish three main approaches to understanding leadership:

1. *The Trait/Style school*, which focuses on the characteristics or approaches of individual leaders (McCall & Lombardo, 1983; Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1973);
2. *The Situational/Context school*, which focuses on how the external environment shapes leadership action (Hersey & Blanchard, 1999; Vroom & Yetton, 1973); and
3. *The Contingency/Interactionist school*, which is about the interaction between the individual leader and his/her framing context (Fiedler, 1971; De Vries, 2001).

To these can be added the rather more practical tenets of leadership as described by Goffee and Jones (2009):

1. Leadership is *relational*. It is something you do with people, not to people. Put simply, you cannot be a leader without followers. Like all relationships, it needs to be monitored and cultivated.
2. Leadership is *non-hierarchical*. Formal authority or a title doesn’t make you a leader. Leaders can be found at all levels.
3. Leadership is *contextual*. You need to size up and tap into what exists around you and then bring more to the party.

## **Defining Sustainability Leadership**

These definitions and theories provide the background for understanding sustainability leadership, which has emerged as a topic in its own right in recent years. According to a survey of 766 United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) member CEOs (Accenture & UNGC, 2010), 93% of CEOs see sustainability as important to their company’s future success. But this begs the question: what do we mean by sustainability leadership? We offer the following simple definition:

*“A sustainability leader is someone who inspires and supports action towards a better world.”*

The Sustainability Leadership Institute (2011) offers another definition, suggesting that sustainability leaders as “individuals who are compelled to make a difference by deepening their awareness of themselves in relation to the world around them. In doing so, they adopt new ways of seeing, thinking and interacting that result in innovative, sustainable solutions.”

Based on a review of the leadership literature and our experience in working with senior leaders on sustainability, we take the view that sustainability leadership – or more precisely, leadership for sustainability – is not a separate school of leadership, but a particular blend of leadership characteristics applied within a definitive context. If it is to be aligned with a mainstream school of leadership at all, the *Contingency/Interactionist school* is probably most relevant, as the context – comprising the sustainability challenges facing the world and our aspirations for a more sustainable future – calls for particular types of leadership and is manifested in key areas of action.

Sandy Ogg (2010), Chief Human Resources Officer for Unilever, explains this contingency approach when he says, “I don’t think there’s any difference between character or timeless elements [of leadership], whether you’re leading sustainability or whether you’re leading for profit. But when it comes to the differentiators, why is it that Paul Polman [CEO of Unilever] stands out? It’s because he understands the context and he understands leading with empathy in a multi stakeholder environment.”

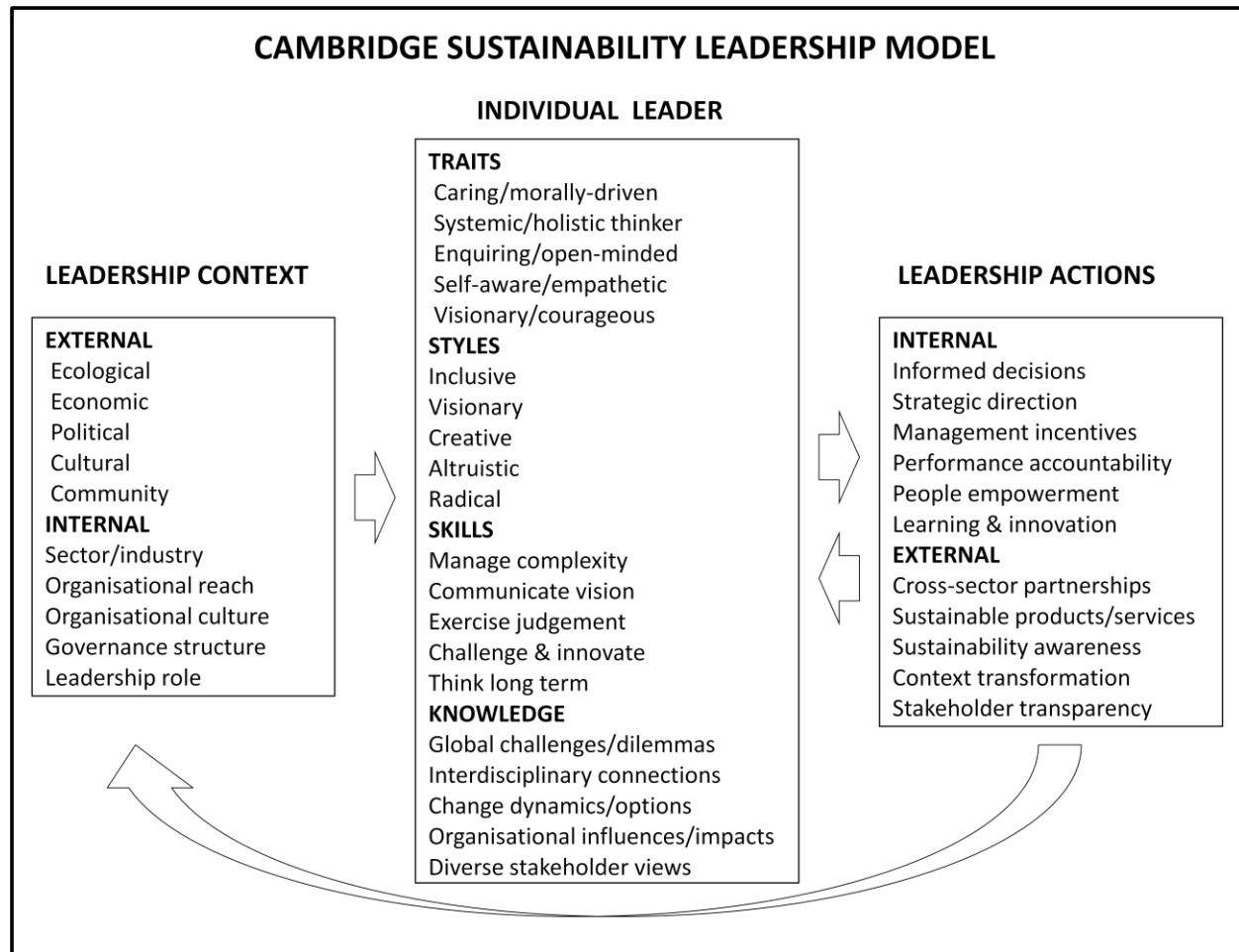
Interestingly, a number of business leaders felt that the need to differentiate sustainability leadership from leadership in general may be a necessary, but temporary phenomenon. For instance, Ian Cheshire (2010) believes that “sustaining the [sustainability] agenda and really embedding it in the organisation is the unique current set of challenges on a 10 year view. Beyond that, hopefully it becomes much more business as usual.” Similarly, Neil Carson (2010), CEO of Johnson Matthey, says: “This is like the quality revolution that we had in the eighties. What happened was companies either died or they got quality. One day this is going to be the same for sustainability. But there’s an interim period where that’s only true for some companies. So you’ve probably got ten years or maybe longer of there being a need for it to be pointed out that there is *sustainability* leadership and that it’s important.”

Drawing on both the theory of leadership and the practice of sustainability by leaders, we designed and tested a Sustainability Leadership Model – depicted and described below – which has three components: the external and internal context for leadership; the traits, styles, skills and knowledge of the individual leader; and leadership actions. None of these elements is unique to sustainability leaders, but collectively they encapsulate a distinctive set of characteristics and actions in response to sustainability challenges.

The sustainability leadership that we observe in practice and describe below is geared towards bringing about profound change, whether in our political and economic systems, our business models and practices, or in the broad social contract with stakeholders and society. Hence, the leadership model we have developed is implicitly about creating change.

## A Model of Sustainability Leadership

Figure 1: Cambridge Sustainability Leadership Model



### Context

In our model, context refers to the conditions or environment in which leaders operate, which have a direct or indirect bearing on their institutions and on their decision making. This context is broadly divided into the context that is *external* to their institution and over which they may have a lesser degree of influence (e.g. ecological, economic, political, cultural and community contexts), and *internal* to their institution or sector, over which they are generally assumed to have higher levels of influence (e.g. the organizational culture, governance structure or role of leadership).

Many business leaders are conscious of the role of context. For example, Jeff Immelt (2007), CEO of General Electric says, “The most important thing I’ve learned since becoming CEO is context. It’s how your company fits in with the world and how you respond to it.”

Similarly, José Lopez (2010), Executive Vice President Operations and GLOBE of Nestlé, explained that “the context is that sustainability processes in place today are not trending in the right direction. As a matter of fact, poverty is going up, the world is not moving on essential things like waste, like emissions and utilisation of resources. So with that realisation companies incorporate in their vision and mission what they are in business for, and then that gets enacted by continuous improvement processes that they carry out. What is important is the context. When you look at the creating shared value approach you don’t have any more, in the case of Nestlé, just a ‘making money’ kind of context.”

### **Individual Characteristics**

Understanding the sustainability leader requires that we appreciate their traits, styles, skills and knowledge. It is a combination of these that make the individual leader unique. For example, when asked, “How would people in Unilever describe you as a leader?” Paul Polman (2009), CEO of Unilever, said: “I hope that the word integrity comes into that. I hope the word long term comes into that. I hope the word caring comes into that, but demanding as well.”

Individual sustainability leaders are unlikely to embody all of the traits, styles, skills and knowledge in our model. Rather, they need to draw on what is appropriate or fitting to their own personality and circumstances, so as to be most effective in addressing sustainability challenges. Furthermore they will seek to develop these qualities in others, building teams that bring as many of the required elements to bear, and in effect enabling a form of distributed leadership (Center for Excellence in Leadership et. al, 2007) to exist within the organisation.

Doppelt (2010) cites the case of Interface, which focuses more on team structure than on individual leaders. He writes, “some are entrepreneurs, some are team builders, some are competitors, some are commanders, some are safety orientated and some are creators. Few people excel in all these areas. The entrepreneur is the antithesis of those who are safety orientated. The commander is the antithesis of the team builder. While no single person may have all these attributes, they are all needed for Interface to achieve its potential.”

### ***Traits***

There are any number of lists of ideal leadership traits. For example, Kouzes and Posner (2007) argue that good leaders are honest, forward looking, competent, inspiring and intelligent. In a globalising world, Morrison (2000) emphasises the importance of leaders developing competencies tailored to their company.

We believe the sustainability leader typically embodies a number of traits, by which we mean distinguishing attributes, qualities or personal characteristics which are generally seen as being enduring. The following summarises those that are included in our Model as strongly correlated with leadership for sustainability.

**Table 1: Typical Traits of Sustainability Leaders**

<i>Trait</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Illustrative quote</i>
Caring / morally-driven	Care for the well-being of humanity and all other forms of life, as well as being guided by a moral compass.	We're at the crossroads. Adam Smith spoke in his 'Wealth of the Nations' about profit and care, saying that the first thing we do is take care of ourselves, but the second thing we do is take care of others. By care, I don't only mean care about other people, but also care about society and care about nature. – <i>Jan Muehlfeit, Chairman of Microsoft Europe</i>
Systemic / holistic thinker	The ability to appreciate the interconnectedness and interdependency of the whole system, at all levels, and to recognise how changes to parts of the system affect the whole	In time periods of relative stability, you don't need to be a systems thinker [but] we're in a period now of great volatility. So the type of people that ultimately are going to lead at sustainability (and one of the reasons why it's so tough) is that it really requires a new generation of systems thinkers to make it work. That's why some of these issues are so hard to solve because they really require forward systems thinking, solutions orientation. – <i>Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric</i>
Enquiring / open-minded	Actively seeking new knowledge and diverse opinions, questioning received wisdom, including being willing to have one's own opinions challenged	It is about looking outside [and staying] permanently engaged. There is a community activity which brings you a lot of information, but it's also about talking and making sure you get enough challenge on what you do. Our children are looking at the world differently. If we are going to be in power in the next 10 or 20 years, we need to make sure we can respond to this demand properly. – <i>Philippe Maso, CEO of AXA</i>
Self-aware / empathetic	High levels of emotional intelligence, (the ability to understand their own emotions and those of others), sincerity, personal humility and reflexivity (the ability to see their own place in and influence on a situation)	Real leadership is about greater and greater self-awareness and being more and more authentically yourself. Then you can use that knowledge or that mastery to put together and drive better teams – because you're more clear about who you are, what your impact is, what you have to offer and what you don't have and therefore you need. And by association that implies the humility to listen and be aware as opposed to being on broadcast and an egomaniac, which I think is the traditional model of CEOs. – <i>Ian Cheshire, CEO of Kingfisher</i>
Visionary / courageous	Bringing inspiration, creativity, optimism and courage to bear in the role, driven to produce results and possessing the ability to balance passion and idealism with ambition and pragmatism	Do we have the courage to put up a magnetic north out there for our company in an environment where everything changes every day? It's absolutely necessary. You have to have the courage to say, 'You know what, I don't necessarily know the end destination, but I know it's gonna look something like this and we're going that way. That's one thing I love about Paul Polman. He says, 'Listen, I may be wrong, but I'm not confused'. – <i>Sandy Ogg, Former Chief Human Resources Officer for Unilever</i>

## Styles

We make a clear distinction between traits of individual leaders and the style, or the the manner and approach which they use to provide direction, to motivate people and to implement plans. Lewin, Lippitt and White (1939) carried out leadership decision experiments and identified three different styles of leadership: autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire<sup>2</sup>. One particularly influential model was Blake and Mouton's (1968) Managerial Grid, which concluded that leadership styles were all essentially varying combinations of concern for people and concern for tasks. Similarly, the sustainability leader typically draws on a combination of number of styles, as illustrated below.

**Table 2: Typical Styles of Sustainability Leaders**

<i>Style</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Illustrative quote</i>
Inclusive	Collaborative and participative, building commitment through dialogue and consensus, democratic approaches, coaching, and a culture and structure that provides peer support, encouragement and recognises achievement	Leaders actually lead through teams. The idea that you have a superstar leader is just nonsense. The whole aspect of selecting, developing and managing teams as the core challenge of leadership is something I feel particularly strongly about. A great definition of leadership, is about getting people to go where they wouldn't have gone on their own. If they can get there on their own then they don't really need a leader. Equally, you can't always be dragging them in the opposite direction to where they want to go. It's about the leader and the followers working together to get to certain outcomes. – Ian Cheshire, CEO of Kingfisher
Visionary	Brings passion and charisma into the mix, focusing on challenging and transforming people's perceptions and expectations, and motivating them to transcend narrower forms of self-interest	There's so much going on now in the world that if you don't have amplification and time compression, then it doesn't rumble. So I call that 'leading big'. If you've got something meaningful and important that you want to do, have the courage to lead big. You can't let it drool or dribble out into an organisation like ours and expect to have any impact. People are just too busy, there's too much going on. I think that the thunder is important too because people have to feel a message that is linked to emotion. – Sandy Ogg, Former Chief Human Resources Officer for Unilever
Creative	Playing the role of designer, architect, innovator, game-changer and transformer of the system	There is an inquisitiveness and a problem solving, or just a curiosity and a willingness to see things through other people's point of view. When I hear that Bill Gates is working on malaria, I get the sense that maybe it can be solved. That gives me great hope because he's going to apply tremendous resources and a headset for solutions that allow some of these big problems to be solved.

<sup>2</sup> Other popular styles of leadership that have been identified and studied include: charismatic (Musser, 1987), participative (Coch & French, 1948; Vroom & Yetton, 1973), situational (Hersey & Blanchard, 1999), transactional (Burns, 1978; Adair, 1984; Drucker, 1993), transformational (Bass, 1990), quiet (Collins, 2001) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977).

		– <i>Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric</i>
Altruistic	Transcending self interest and focusing on the collective or the good of the whole, which is often characterised as servant leadership	Bill Gates is absolutely the model for people in Microsoft – especially with what he is doing with Africa in terms of the education, what he is doing in India. It is a very good example of a leader because he is basically saying, ‘I will spend my money on the big issues that this planet is having.’ For me personally – I’ve been with the company for 17 years – it’s a huge role model for what to do to change the world for the better. – <i>Jan Muehlfeit, Chairman of Microsoft Europe</i>
Radical	Highly visible leadership, characterised by taking risks, acting like a revolutionary, campaigner, crusader or activist and challenging of the status quo; often referred to as missionary leadership	Be daring, be first, be different, be just. If you think you're too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito. – <i>Anita Roddick, Founder &amp; former CEO of The Body Shop International</i>

### ***Skills***

A survey of business and sustainability leaders in the UK (Isos MORI, 2010) found that 99% recognise that developing the skills that will be needed for a sustainable economy is important to the future success of the UK economy, while 70% believe that the gap in skills for a sustainable economy will become one of the most pressing challenges facing UK businesses in the next 5 years. At the same time, only 15% think that developing the skills needed for a sustainable economy is well-established or partly established in UK businesses in general (as compared with 48% for their own organisation).

The skills for sustainability leadership, as per our Model, are introduced below.

**Table 3: Typical Skills of Sustainability Leaders**

<i>Skill</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Illustrative quote</i>
Manage complexity	Analysing, synthesising, and translating complex issues, responding to risk, uncertainty and dilemmas, recognising and seizing opportunities and resolving problems or conflicts	Sustainability is a complex thing to conceive and everyone who comes with too simplistic views [is] not effective, because reality would prevail at some point in time. You have to accept that there is a huge complexity of knowledge and the way we frame it. You need to be quite sure you are pushing in the right direction. There is a quantum of uncertainty that needs to be not too high, so you can really have positive actions. – <i>Philippe Maso, CEO of AXA</i>
Communicate vision	Sharing a vision and facilitating dialogue that inspires action and	The key thing for leadership agendas is the ability to genuinely communicate – which is actually a two way process of genuinely listening well and communicating



	creates shared meaning (active listening, emotional intelligence, reflection) and creating conditions that encourage learning from experience	well. Because in some pure sense we don't actually build anything with our hands; all we do as leaders is communicate. We basically get things to happen through communication. I do think that A-grade leadership is very hard to do without good communication skills. You can go so far if you're technically gifted but not terribly good at communication. Communications is most critical and most difficult in increasingly complex organizations. – Ian Cheshire, CEO of Kingfisher
Exercise judgment	Making good and decisive decisions in a timely fashion, including prioritising, making difficult choices and handling dilemmas	How do you solve any big problem? You break it down. Let's go to Indonesia. Let's get specific. Let's talk about the supply chain and what is it that you can do there? That's probably something that we can solve. If you think it all the way through, you can have a plan in Indonesia of two or three things which, if we focus on it and pay attention to it, we can have a business that's 3 billion. – Sandy Ogg, Former Chief Human Resources Officer for Unilever
Challenge and innovate	Imagining possible solutions/futures or alternatives, thinking outside the box, and bringing creativity into thinking and practice	Until everybody on the whole planet gets sustainability there's a real competitive advantage in moving in this direction aggressively. The more competitive the individual leader is in terms of natural inclinations then the more quickly they'll latch on to sustainability. – Neil Carson, CEO of Johnson Matthey
Think long term	Envisioning and using strategic, long thinking and planning, seeing the whole, while not discounting the future	To be credible in the sustainability space there needs to be a clear demonstration of a vision of 50 to 100 years from now. Sustainability must have a longer term vision and must be able to articulate that. – Truett Tate, Group Executive Director: Wholesale, for Lloyds Banking Group

## Knowledge

The Ipsos MORI (2010) survey on the skills required for sustainability leadership in the UK found that middle managers and function heads especially need sufficient knowledge about sustainability to translate it into successful business strategies, as well as effective and persuasive communication using clear and accessible language.

The most important areas of knowledge for sustainability leaders are introduced below.

**Table 4: Typical Knowledge of Sustainability Leaders**

<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Illustrative quote</i>
Global challenges and dilemmas	Social and ecological system pressures and the connections between these systems and political and economic forces	The first challenge is inclusive globalisation. The other global issue is the gap between the rich and poor, the inequality gap. The other one has to do with the emerging markets, because 20 years ago we had one billion people in the western style of capitalism, today it's probably 3 to 4 billion. That's where I think leadership needs to go, to be

		<p>much more aware of those global issues. What the business leaders need to do is to create a bigger picture and also to be much more connected to the big global challenges.</p> <p>– <i>Jan Muehlfeit, Chairman of Microsoft Europe</i></p>
Interdisciplinary connectedness	The relevance and interconnectedness of the physical sciences, social sciences, technology, business and other disciplines	<p>How do you develop leaders for this time period of volatility we live in today? One of the things that we are quite keen on is what we call systems thinking. It's people that can integrate between technology, market needs, public policy and so on. You have to integrate many things all at the same time.</p> <p>– <i>Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric</i></p>
Change dynamics and options	How complex systems work and the range of options for promoting beneficial change in them, e.g. financial markets, policy options and trends, technology options, consumer behaviour and attitudes, organisational dynamics, change models and metrics	<p>What could easily happen is that when taking small steps to start with, they become large bounds later. Intuitively, I'm a practical being and I think that there's no other way of doing it, you can't go from 0 to 60 miles an hour in one bound. My instinct is that we've probably got 10 or 20 years, but also that things can accelerate once you get started. Businesses will lead consumers along this path, they'll start to get engaged and then governments will follow in the end.</p> <p>– <i>Neil Carson, CEO of Johnson Matthey</i></p>
Organisational influences and impacts	An organisation's full impact (footprint), finding and developing opportunities for value creation and new markets	<p>Why did Greenpeace to drop their campaign against Nestle? It's been achieved by putting on the table a very technical view of the issues we are talking about. We've demonstrated that we have a logic, a path and a process that drives continuous improvement into topics of high concern, which in this case is deforestation. What matters is not that we agree on how the world should look at the end of all that and who should be in charge and how should people behave and so on, but that we agree that what we are doing truly delivers improvement and betterment of the sustainability of nature.</p> <p>– <i>José Lopez, Executive Vice President: Operations and GLOBE of Nestle</i></p>
Diverse stakeholder views	Different world views and belief systems, both within communities and across geographic, cultural and political divides, and how to incorporate these appropriately	<p>Through technology and the evolution of our mentality, we ask leaders to be much more capable of engaging in a web of relationships. We know the difference between being an influencer versus being a commander or controller. The stakeholder-orientation is seen in a new breed of people which is emerging everywhere who have been trained in doing things differently and can carry messages that are very difficult to get across and require a very specific attitude, which is a rare but increasingly recognised skill.</p>

## Leadership Actions

According to the Accenture & UNGC (2010) survey, CEOs believe that execution is now the real challenge to bringing about the new era of sustainability. Leadership action is particularly

important, because the gap between sustainability aspirations or imperatives and actual performance remains wide. For example, IBM's (2009) sustainable enterprise survey of more than 220 senior executives worldwide shows that 60% believed CSR had increased in importance over the past year.

Yet, there continues to be a significant gap between the business and sustainability goals companies are setting for themselves and what they are actually doing to attain them. Hence, 'walking the talk' is the real test. As Polman (2009) says, "you cannot talk yourself out of things you've behaved yourself into".

The individual leaders and the actions they take have a self-evidently reciprocal relationship, each having the potential to impact and change the other. Typical internal actions include:

- Making informed decisions;
- Providing strategic direction;
- Crafting management incentives;
- Ensuring performance accountability;
- Empowering people; and
- Embedding learning and innovation.

In addition, sustainability leaders typically respond to the challenges and opportunities of sustainability through the following external (stakeholder-related) actions:

- Fostering cross sector partnerships;
- Creating sustainable products and services;
- Promoting sustainability awareness;
- Context transformation; and
- Ensuring transparency.

## Conclusion

Although we have presented sustainability leadership as a simple model, one of our most compelling and persistent findings was that sustainability leadership is fraught with paradoxes. As the competitive landscape shifts and global challenges evolve, companies that were lauded in the past as sustainability leaders may be discredited in the present. Similarly, today's targeted villains may end up being tomorrow's sustainability heroes and vice versa.

The paradoxes of sustainability leadership are explored in more detail in the CPSL (2011) report, entitled *A Journey of a Thousand Miles: The State of Sustainability Leadership 2011*. In this report, we also present a simplified and synthesized version of the model presented in this paper, in which we propose seven key characteristics of sustainability leadership, including:

1. systemic understanding
2. emotional intelligence

3. values orientation
4. compelling vision
5. inclusive style
6. innovative approach; and
7. long term perspective.

In the final analysis, sustainability leaders realise that their task is, ultimately, about survival. Ogg (2010) says “This is what Paul Polman has been very, very clear about. This is not some aspirational dream to help us to try to recruit the best people in the world. At the end of the day this is a survival issue. We will not get the right to grow, and even worse, will not have the right to be in business, if we create a big environmental disaster. The world won’t put up with it. There’s too much awareness and amplification. You think about the impact a blogger can have when they choose to amplify their message”.

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