Leadership Agility for
Sustainability Change Agents

By
Cynthia Scott Ph.D. M.P.H.
Introduction

Sustainability Initiatives: Opportunity for Change Management

Sustainability initiatives represent shifts in environmental, economic, cultural, and social elements of organizational strategy and operations. Such initiatives range from increasing transparency across supply chain relationships, changes in product design for resource and cost efficiency, to tapping internal employee initiative to release engagement and innovation.

At the core of sustainable leadership is the ability to be an agile facilitator of change, requiring advanced capabilities in strategy formation and execution in complex, multi-stakeholder environments. Sustainability leaders need to be able to navigate individual, group, and whole organizational systems to translate ideas and technical expertise into desired actions. The systemic nature of many of these changes calls for strategic vision and day-to-day execution as well as a level of personal resilience and agility that can challenge the most seasoned leader.

Attention to Sustainability has Risen

Changes brought by attention to sustainability have created many opportunities to apply change management principles to both individual and organizational action.

Accenture has been tracing the attitudes and approaches towards sustainability. Its 2011 study found that 67% of 247 C-suite decision-makers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and China said that sustainability is very important to their company, and 72% thought the benefits of their sustainability initiatives exceeded expectations, especially around brand attributes, like improved reputation and consumer trust, and cost reduction (Accenture, 2011).

Findings from an MIT Sloan 2010 sustainability and innovation global executive study, ‘Sustainability: The “Embracers” Seize Advantage’ show that most survey respondents say sustainability is on their companies’ management agendas to stay. The study reports that most managers believe a sustainability strategy is a competitive necessity. (Haanaes et al. 2011)

Most recently, The UN Global Compact/Accenture CEO Study on Sustainability 2013, Architects of a Better World: Building the Post-2015 Business Engagement Architecture, shows CEOs are accelerating the journey from plateau to peak sustainability interest and action. This study reports that the largest barriers to driving sustainability initiatives are

1. lack of interest,
2. belief in benefits
3. application of good change leadership (Accenture, 2013).

The Focus of “Sustainability” is Becoming Broader

The popular definition of sustainability is, ‘meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED 1987). This definition is frequently shortened to mean, ‘protecting the environment’. But in recent years, sustainability has been recast as a broader concept, encompassing the social,
economic, environmental and cultural systems needed to sustain any organization (Werbach 2009). This broader definition poses change management challenges, as the value of sustainability must be addressed on multiple levels. In order to move in this direction leaders must engage employees, suppliers, customers and even community members, in a series of developmental steps.

This broader definition mirrors the realisation that sustainability change is not about implementing a few policy changes, but involves a deep shift of awareness and behaviour everywhere in the organization, requiring substantial change management support.

**Sustainability Offers Multiple Opportunities for Change Management**

In adapting to sustainability challenges, organizations do not change in a smooth pattern but progress in a series of step-wise phases:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Organizational Response</th>
<th>CM approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not interested</td>
<td>Unresponsive</td>
<td>Awareness building, industry review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning awareness</td>
<td>Attend conferences, customer engagement</td>
<td>Benchmarking/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliance Focused</td>
<td>Plan response to regulation, set minimal requirements</td>
<td>Risk management/Reporting structures/cross functional task forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Efficiency</td>
<td>Cost savings, product and operations improvement</td>
<td>Structured metrics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategic Engagement</td>
<td>Corporate Social responsibility initiatives, philanthropy, employee &amp; brand engagement</td>
<td>Strategic planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game Changer</td>
<td>Internal innovation, market disruption, brand positioning</td>
<td>Organizational transformation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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As organizations navigate through these phases of sustainability adaptation their change management efforts shift from being focused on ‘outside-in’ drivers (i.e. NGO pressure, consumer or community mobilization) to ‘inside-out’ driven initiatives (i.e. efficiency, cost savings, resource management). In some cases employee-driven actions (i.e. recycling, composting, etc.) turn into more formalized initiatives (i.e. Green Teams). To reach the strategic engagement stage requires collaborative efforts that would involve...
customers in creating ‘community built brands’ where customers interact and shape the efforts (contests in which participants nominate the recipients of awards). The most advanced leadership and change management efforts happen when game changing goals impact not just their business but also in the eco-system of their suppliers and customers.

Observations

Sustainability is a Driver of Organizational Change

As organizations move through each stage of adaptation, leaders in charge of sustainability efforts (chief sustainability officers, directors of public affairs, directors of employee engagement, etc.) use a series of core change management skills to create change in operations, manufacturing, marketing, human resources and environmental health and safety. These leaders are often using sustainability as a ‘strange attractor’ to engage cross department collaboration in designing and implementing change that can have broad, systemic impact.

Establish Partnerships with Sustainability Professionals

Sustainable leaders come to their work along two main paths: they either have responsibility for initiating sustainability focused work thrust upon them, or they initiate these roles as ‘intrapreneurs’, engaging their organizations from a values-based conviction that change in this direction is necessary. A few have the opportunity to receive targeted education in sustainable leadership from the innovative MBA/ MPA programs at Presidio Graduate School and Bainbridge Graduate School, where sustainability thinking is integrated into all courses. Most have initiated their own learning path, with varying degrees of preparation in change management/leadership skills.

Making Sustainability Irresistible Needs New Approaches

Because many topics addressed by sustainability concerns (climate change, resources scarcity, social justice and behavior change) have the potential to be emotionally threatening it is important to use the best behavioral science research to mobilize these changes.

Many approaches to mobilize sustainable change have used fear-based exhortations-“the polar bears are dying”- to jolt people into action. Often this has the opposite effect of immobilizing people because of perceiving threat drives people away from action. As organizational change theories are evolving from finding and fixing problems to using appreciative Inquiry approaches, sustainability change leaders are using social networking, social cognitive models and positive psychology to inform the development of sustainability-focused changes. Partyka, 2013).

Connecting Personal Change Management to Organizational Change

An underpinning of sustainability-focused changes highlights the importance of connecting personal leadership resilience to creating organizational resilience. It represents an alternative to more traditional tell-and-sell leadership models. (Jaffe et al, 1994)

Successful leaders of sustainability initiatives are using a combination of, community
activation, self-management and social support based on grass roots social action. These elements were used to design and implement the pioneering work of the Personal Sustainability Practice (PSP) set up at Wal-Mart, to engage 1.3 million employees to support their three sustainability goals created in 2005.

1. To be supplied 100% by renewable energy.
2. To create zero waste.
3. To sell products that sustains people and the environment.


This work was supported by tools that are not specific to sustainability change management, but have been adapted to fit the long-term change management efforts that sustainability shifts often require. (Scott and Esteves, 2013). This model draws from the strong change management principles created as the result of a multi-year engagement to create a worldwide methodology for change management. (Jaffe and Scott, 1999).

A Change Leadership Model for Sustainability Initiatives

Successful sustainability leaders follow a navigational path of repeatable actions to focus and sequence change management strategy, over the course of multiple initiatives.

1. Sense: Identify your core purpose and values to connect your actions to personal intention.
2. Scout: Explore what others are doing, gather ideas, assess your own change approaches and identify organizational readiness. Identify key partners and engage them in your actions.
3. Synthesize: Identify clusters of action and build them into a pattern of commitment. Show the path that you think change will travel. Design, test and re-design to evolve your approach. Build coherent stories, invite feedback and show progress.
4. Steer: Mobilize action, calibrate as necessary, encourage feedback and track progress.
5. Soar: Acknowledge and celebrate accomplishments and learning’s. Reassess choices and recalibrate approaches

Let us now identify some of the actions leaders of sustainability initiatives use in each of these stages.
1. Sense:
Build Personal Resilience

Leading sustainability change requires both short-term action and long-term perseverance. Creating change in your organization means starting with yourself. An organization can only go as far as its leaders: you will only ever be able to create as much change as you can tolerate yourself. It is important to know why you’re doing what you’re doing.

It takes stamina to keep holding the tension between your vision for the future and the current state of the organization. Leaders of sustainability initiatives are change agents, and change agents often get burned out because they care. Sustainability can provide a refreshed sense of purpose for your work. Look for the connections between your organization’s products, services, and strategy, to identify relationships that may have not been fully optimized.

2. Scout:
Focus on what’s working

In all organizations there are people who are succeeding despite the shortcomings of the processes and structures that are in place. Their actions are often ignored or undervalued because the results they produce, though positive, are neither highly visible nor easily measurable. This concept of focusing on “what is working” also known as “positive deviance”, emerged from social science research that began to look for and focus on people whose results did not fit the standard, inquiring into what they were doing that made the difference (Dearden, et al. 2002).

Applying this thinking to change management approaches, it is important to search for and notice the small things that people are already doing to create positive change. This goes against the tradition of “identifying problems” and celebrating heroic efforts to “fix” them. When leaders pay attention to these smaller efforts, they encourage other people to make similar efforts, generating more energy. What the leader notices draws attention to the unnoticed action, magnifying a small action into a larger ripple effect.

Change Leaders Hold Tension

Sustainability leaders need to have the ability to function in two realities: holding the aspiration of a more sustainable future while at the same time focusing on current actions. These realities represent two versions of the truth and often require maintaining a focus on and respect for the existing system while building the new one.

Very often, a current way of doing and thinking is coming to an end due to increased awareness. These patterns are deeply embedded and have provided value in the environment in which they were constructed, even if they may not continue to provide value to the new reality that is being built.

People who initiate change do so with the understanding of the Transition Curve, which depicts the four predictable stages that individuals and organizations go through in responding to change.
It acknowledges two starting points, either from the result of frustration with the way things are or realization that the current state cannot be maintained. People who are 'changed' as the result of other’s decisions or circumstances outside their control can experience an extended time of denying that the change is happening to maintain a sense of control. This denial or even a lack of awareness that the change is happening is connected to our uniquely human capability of not paying attention to things that are threatening or overwhelming.

3. **Synthesize:**
Find Patterns and Build Commitment

**Understand Change as a Journey**

The best sustainability leaders do two things simultaneously: they engage a broad conversation to create a shared vision of a compelling future, and they identify a path of specific actions to reach that goal. Creating a ‘Roadmap’ of the current environment provides a communication tool for illustrating 4 major elements of the journey:

1. History of your organization that has brought you to this point.
2. Significant trends that are making it vital to pay attention to the sustainability issues.
3. Vision of the outcome and impact.
4. Navigation path and key initiatives to connect the current state to the future.

It can be tempting for leaders to want to skip over talking about historic choices and actions and just focus on the current state and the path forward. However, having people talk about their organization’s history provides an opportunity to acknowledge past learning’s and accomplishments and reminds people of their resilience and adaptability. Looking backward to go forward builds enduring momentum and courage for change.

4. **Steer:**
Implement and calibrate

This is where the impact and results of the first three actions – Sense, Scout, and Synthesize – manifest. At this point in the change journey, the tipping point has been reached and it is clear that there is no going back to the prior way of doing things.

It can be hard to predict just how this shift will manifest. Leaders of sustainability efforts can think that all the careful planning and set up will lead to action in a smooth and predictable way, but bumps in the road are inevitable. One change creates the opportunity for others to take place in a continuous cycle of mobilizing action, tracking progress, telling impact stories, and giving and using feedback on progress. Leading sustainability efforts take more than one-time events but an ongoing stewardship of bringing sustainability into all levels of organizational life.
Measure and Show Results

Being able to demonstrate change requires some way of showing the difference being made. This can be in the form of highly specific measurements (e.g., waste reduction, energy savings, product sourcing partnerships) or of new behaviors that link to impact metrics (e.g., an increase in employee engagement strategies leading to lower turnover).

Embrace Unintended Consequences

Because all change occurs in a larger system of relationships, there will be times when a well-intentioned change creates unintended consequences in other parts of the system. These are to be expected and anticipated, take time to think through potential points of interaction to give you a broader insight into potential relationships that need to be considered.

5. Soar: Celebrate and Reassess

Change is a continuous process, especially as broader conditions change. Innovation is the result of many approximations; the path forward is not always apparent but emerges as things are tried and refined. Leaders make mistakes, generating the opportunity to apologize and start over. Sustainability leaders join a long tradition of change agents who tried things before they were proven. Using rapid prototyping and pilots provides a way to try things and gain feedback for modification.

Seek Feedback and Incorporate Learning

The surest way to maintain momentum for any change is to keep learning about how to improve your results and adjusting based on that information. Rapid feedback provides data for prompt improvement and creates an environment of accountability and transparency that fosters innovation. This naturally occurring cycle incorporates pausing to evaluate results, not just at the easily measured level of energy saved, waste diverted, and costs reduced but also at the level of engagement and willingness to go to the next level of change.

Final Conclusions

Sustainable Leadership Requires Personal & Organizational Change Management Skills

Leading sustainability initiatives requires a great deal of emphasis on having a personal alignment with the work you are doing. You don’t have to be perfect but you do have to understand how your own personal values connect to your work in the context of sustainability. Taking time to examine how your values and your work are linked, and taking time to address potential disconnects between your actions and your words, will provide resilience and career stamina as you continue to grow as a change agent. In the process of implementation, it is important to remember that building organizational resilience will be an important part of every ongoing commitment and innovation.

An important aspect of sustainability leadership is to authentically connect your personal story to what you do. You will be asked over and over why you are doing what you are doing. Your answer will give you a way to remind yourself of your purpose and an opportunity to offer a personal story of why you are involved in this work. It may be as simple as wanting your
children and grandchildren to have a thriving world to grow up in or as complex as creating an organization that provides innovative solutions for alternative energy. Refresh and strengthen your connection to your work by asking yourself these questions at regular intervals:

- What is your personal connection to sustainability?
- What personal actions have you taken that support your connection?
- How are these connected to your leadership actions?

Your answers to these questions will provide the foundation of your resilience and impact as a leader.

**Transparency not Perfection**

An increased emphasis on the connection between your personal choices and leadership actions comes with the territory. If you are advocating change in your organization, you will be watched to see whether you are ‘walking your talk’. No one is perfect, and the willingness to receive feedback and provide genuine acknowledgement of others’ efforts will go a long way toward establishing an environment of innovation and change. The compassion for how hard it is to make change is a good thing to remember when your behavior falls short. Be mindful of daily choices and be open to acknowledging imperfect alignment of values with behavior.

**Make Sustainability Your Change Brand**

As Change Management professional, working with sustainability leaders can provide a new way to direct your talents and capabilities toward an area that is presenting challenges and opportunities to organizations.
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