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Why leading for sustainability is different

Leading organisations towards sustainability goals requires focusing on the three key activities of defining, translating and containing emotional responses

Sustainability-focused organisational goals can evoke despair and frustration, but it can also bring people together.

When I started doing research with organisations determined to achieve higher levels of sustainability, I didn't expect to find anything particularly

unique. After all, isn't it just like any other change initiative, with its attendant problems of inertia, resistance and lack of buy-in?



A number of case studies later, however, I'm convinced there are specific ways in which leading organisations towards sustainability-focused goals is different. In particular, those attempting to make this kind of shift need to spend a significant amount of time on three key activities: Defining, translating and containing emotional responses.

Defining

The need for defining arises from the term sustainability itself. I've been bemused by turning up to Leading Sustainable Organisations events only to find them focused on how organisations might survive financially in testing economic conditions. When the word sustainability is raised, the question, "sustainability of what?" is worth asking.

Is it the organisation's ability to continue as a separate institution at stake? Or is the larger eco-system of which it is a part being considered? As well as the eco-system, does the term sustainability take into account the social issues key to an organisation's survival? Leaders need to define the reach of the sustainability they intend to tackle.

Defining this scope is not just a one-off task.

In one of the organisations I studied, an FE college director spoke about the continual need to update what sustainability meant. She said: "When we first started talking about becoming more sustainable, we thought it just required putting recycling bins around the place and encouraging people to shut off lights. But the more we began talking about what it meant to us as a community, we realised it was about our values.

"It's about the way in which we are together, what we hope for – for ourselves, our families and our community as an educational institution. Our understanding of sustainability and how to achieve it shifted the more we talked about it."

Translating

Unlike other organisational change initiatives, the sustainability agenda is largely derived from scientific discourse. Leaders may not necessarily understand this discourse nor feel completely comfortable with it. However, they are still required to translate scientific understanding into organisational processes, practices and products. In other words, they need to translate issues of scientific significance (such as carbon footprint or peak-oil) into organisationally meaningful goals.

The translation job is made even harder by the fact that scientific understanding itself is continually being updated. For instance, in the wake of fears about peak-oil as well as the impact of carbon, many companies began to explore the possibility of meeting their energy needs through biofuels. However, biofuels have their own environmental and societal impacts.

Increased demand for biofuel crops has resulted in reduced food production, which in turn has led to rising food prices and more hunger among the world's poorest people. Science is also revealing the ecological disadvantages of mono-cropping methods used in biofuel production. So which scientific imperative does a leader follow?

Containing emotions

The final way in which sustainability-focused change differs from other change contexts is in the emotional reactions it evokes from people. From anger to dread, the range of emotions people experience over the need for sustainability can paralyse or catalyse action. Central to mobilising people in effective ways is the leader's ability to help contain the wide range of emotional responses evoked in those they are trying to lead. This is where "talking" plays a crucial role.

When asked what was different about leading a sustainability-driven construction project as compared to others he had been involved in, the chief construction engineer at a sustainability-driven site said: "I've never ever talked so much on any other project. I just had to keep talking, talking, talking to everyone involved – not just about the technical stuff, but about how they felt about the uncertainty involved as well."

Leading sustainability-focused organisational goals involves tough challenges. However, just as it can evoke despair and frustration, sustainability-focused change can galvanise people to work together in ways that pool energy and innovation. That was also a clear message from the research I conducted: for those organisations going beyond greenwash, the sustainability agenda provided an important focus for harnessing the creativity, commitment and passion of organisational members.

The message for those leading their organisations towards higher levels of sustainability is clear: be aware of the difficulties, but focus on the possibilities of this agenda. It promises to become increasingly central to how organisations operate as we move further into the 21st century.

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