BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Creating sustainability: the learning organization in action

Book: Learning for Sustainability
by Peter Senge, Joe Laur, Sara Schley and Bryan Smith (Eds)
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This short book, targeting leaders at various levels irrespective of organizational size or scope, explores how organizations can creatively develop a world that is in "closer harmony with natural systems and human systems." Through several contributions from the editors and other authors, the book argues that there is a need to go beyond "reducing unsustainability" (which has dominated the present political agenda) into "creating sustainability." Creating sustainability refers to what people and organizations need to do to improve human flourishing now and in the future. Several inspiring essays and case studies explore the connections between inner changes in organizational systems and their impact on larger external societal systems.

The opening chapter explains how organizations have a decisive role to play in building their learning capacities in "sustainability." It makes the case for a visionary perspective of a future where companies create value not only for their shareholders, but also communities and larger societal systems.

Peter Senge, in Chapter 2, reaffirms the interconnectedness among institutions that emphasize the impact of managerial behavior on organizational environments. Decision-makers are inclined to ignore this interdependence, and organizations tend to develop mental models along this same line of thinking. This makes the future appear "alien to us[1]." Countering this perspective requires a level of human wisdom that acknowledges the linkages among societal systems. Corporations cannot continue to operate as "externalizing machines," shifting to others the task of finding solutions to the problems they (i.e. corporations) first contributed to creating.

In Chapter 3, Joe Laur and Sara Schley present one mechanism by which "creating sustainability" can be realized. If we can think in terms of "seven generations," three or more in the past and three or more into the future, we would better understand what our grandparents could have done to make the world we live in a better one. Moreover, we would better comprehend what we need to do *now* to make the world a better place for our great-grandchildren.

Continuing on the same theme of what organizations can do to promote sustainability, Bryan Smith, in Chapter 4, addresses the strategic role of sustainability. Under a traditional rarely challenged mental model, sustainability becomes just another distracting noise or fad. What is needed is a genuine integration of sustainability in strategy. This requires deep

reflection *vis-à-vis* our assumptions and the choices that we have as decision-makers if those assumptions change. Moreover, we need to assess how we can become better prepared to address such changes. Sustainability cannot be advanced in isolation; it needs to be a part of an integrated process by which we understand our future, what forces are driving change, and how we can better challenge current assumptions to reach desired outcomes.

Various definitions of sustainability are briefly discussed in Chapter 5. This includes the popular understanding of sustainability referring to efforts aiming at meeting the needs of the current generation without compromising the needs of future generations. Other definitions emphasize the concept of "regeneration" where all forms of life can flourish together.

Several inspiring cases are then presented to reinforce how "learning for sustainability" can be promoted. Chris Page, in Chapter 6, explains how the "Materials Pooling Project" (MPP) works to drive sustainability to a higher level of corporate attention. This "compelling" yet "daunting" idea involves companies working together to create an industrial system without waste. Page explains some of the challenges encountered in MPP including the time spent on collaboration, challenges in integrating suppliers, skepticism about top management support and anti-trust considerations. MPP transforms the mental model of cutthroat competition to one where benefits to organizations and their environments are realized through cooperation and sharing of information.

Ann Graham, in Chapters 7, 8 and 10, presents three compelling case studies. Simon Amber, who was a former Vice President at Schlumberger, explains her journey as a "social entrepreneur in a large company." Some lessons learned from the *Schlumberger Excellence in Educational Development* program include the ability to navigate effectively through existing corporate systems, attract like-minded individuals with a passion for impact, and change perceptions of a company from being a "monster" into becoming "a community of people." As the sustainability manager for UTC Power, Erika Herz explores the onerous task of educating 220,000 employees about sustainability. Incremental steps that were taken included identifying the environmental footprints of all their products in addition to adding a sustainability metric to their design software. Sarah Severn, who was a part of the corporate responsibility team at Nike, explains how the company learned from mistakes, assuming more responsibility along the supply chain. She also explains the challenging task of making sustainability a strategic concern for top management.

In Chapter 9, Bryan Smith and Sue Simington describe how the Uganda Rural Development and Training Program established a development philosophy emphasizing mastery and engagement, departing from the "disempowered we" to the "collective commitment to good." This case study emphasizes the linkages between sustainability as an internal concern for an individual organization, and substantiality as an external outcome for a whole region. Ann Graham, in Chapter 11, presents the case of Reebok's human rights activism as reported by Doug Cahn, a Reebok Vice President. Key takeaways from this case include the significance of top management commitment, the importance of collaborating with others (including competitors) on sustainability issues, and leveraging the use of technology for sustainability.

In the concluding chapter, Sara Schley presents "the inner work of sustainability." Recognizing the interconnectedness of life systems leads to a greater sense of responsibility. This awareness leads to a "creative tension," as we become more aware of the gaps between the existing world as it is, or as it will become, and our ideal life as we wish it to be. Tensions lead to actions, and people continue to "sharpen the saw" of thinking through careful deliberation. More than just being a strategic imperative, sustainability involves personal immersion into what we need to do to mold the future that we envision. Schley concludes by reaffirming the role of emotions in the whole process. Emotions drive people to think more

and reflect more; this eventually leads to meaningful managerial behaviors aligned with sustainability.

At the heart of this short book are fascinating learning points. Across all the cases presented, there was a significant role for sustainability champions. Sustainability concerns do not always arise from a calculated pre-meditated strategic analysis. More often than not, sustainability emerges through the contemplative efforts of a few *converts*, who embrace the sustainability cause. This could very well be one of the main strengths for the sustainability cause; therein also resides one of its most significant risks. The passion of individuals showcased in the book is inspiring. Yet, the drive toward sustainability risks becoming just a new "spiritual" experience. Some people will embrace the sustainability movement wholeheartedly; others will not. While the case for sustainability benefits from personal contemplation and reflection, it will only reach its full potential if it becomes an integral part of a novel well-embraced institutional logic. This was indirectly addressed by Smith who highlighted that passion for the sustainability cause is not enough. Sustainability initiatives need to be part of a clear strategy for corporate engagement.

Almost invariably across all cases presented in the book, the involvement and support of senior executives were instrumental to success. While sometimes one has to "let go" of the business case (Simone Amber), a more reasoned argument for sustainability would be, in my perspective, through the 3H approach, attributed to Orr (1992). Used in educational contexts, learning about sustainability requires the combined effort of the head (reflection), the heart (relational) and the hands (engagement) (Singleton, 2015). In Chapter 2, Senge provided a very reasoned argument for sustainability by referring to data portraying imbalances among inter-related systems (head). The stories of sustainability champions depicted the passion underlying the whole process of "creating sustainability" (heart). Relevant and impactful actions were reflected through various organizational initiatives highlighting the importance of concerted actions, top management attention to sustainability, and collaboration among various parties including competitors (hands).

The book strikingly reflects Senge's five disciplines as applied to sustainability. The work of sustainability champions highlighted the notion of personal mastery toward the accomplishment of desired objectives. The case studies revealed a strong commitment to, and belief in the impact of, change even in huge organizations. "Creating sustainability" requires a departure from commonly held mental models that erroneously separate what we do, as purposeful organizations, from societal concerns. By emphasizing interconnectedness, it becomes salient that our actions impact other entities, even those distinct ones outside our direct realm of influence. Such awareness creates a sense of responsibility; it also develops an emotional attachment to change. Sustainability requires having a clear vision for the future, imagining what type of world we want to hand over to future generations. Organizational initiatives for sustainability reflect a vision for a world where sustainability concerns are integral to organizational strategy. Beyond deep personal reflections, sustainability learning and diffusion of learning occur through lots of teamwork, exchange of ideas and – at some point – collaborative team thinking about the future. What starts as a personal reflection inside a single organization is later translated into a coherent set of actions where various entities engage with each other to create a future that will *not* appear alien to us or to future generations.

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Note

1. Quoting Mieko Nishimiziu, former Vice President of the World Bank, South Asia Region

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