

Chapter 78

Beyond Environment, Economy, and Equity: Implementing Power Balancing and Inclusive Process for Integrating our Agreed Framework of Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Future global leadership requires skills and capacities that go beyond the leadership of one individual or a select few who hold the majority of power and responsibility for making decisions on behalf of their organizations or constituencies. The challenges of the 21st century demand not only a more collaborative and distributed approach, but also one that encourages empathy, resonance, and vulnerability. This chapter focuses on climate change and the capacities needed to address it. A holistic approach to sustainability is often referred to as the “3E’s” of Environment, Economy, and Equity. Given the complex nature of the challenges facing our planet and its governance systems, I argue that we have reached a critical point where it is necessary to add a fourth “E” to the sustainability framework. I would call this fourth “E” Empathy, which in very real terms encompasses a broad range of practices such as transformative conflict resolution, valuing diversity, cross-cultural dialogue, reconciliation, consensus building, collaboration, interdependency, negotiation, mediation, civic engagement, democratic governance, and social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is perhaps an ideal laboratory to study and test an integrative, collaborative and cross-cultural approach to leadership and decision-making. The impacts of global warming will be felt indiscriminately. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, changing the average global temperature by even a degree or two can lead to serious consequences around the globe. In the US alone, for about every 2°F of warming, we can expect to see:

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- 5-15% reductions in the yields of crops as currently grown
- 3-10% increases in the amount of rain falling during the heaviest precipitation events, which can increase flooding risks
- 5-10% decreases in stream flow in some river basins, including the Arkansas and the Rio Grande
- 200%-400% increases in the area burned by wildfire in parts of the western United States (As cited at: <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/basics/facts.html#ref6>, 2014).

Some groups such as the small island nations or those with less access to resources will be impacted sooner than others, however it is foolish to operate in an “us versus them” paradigm or one that prioritizes short-term gains over long-term sustainability. The United Nations Conference of Parties serves as the decision-making and implementation body for the Kyoto Protocol, which sets internationally binding emission reduction targets on climate change. This chapter focuses on my experience observing multi-stakeholder contention at the United Nations talks on climate change, particularly the parties’ inability to balance power in the face of imbalance, and empathically understand, in equivalent ways, the most important interests being advocated by all the parties. To this end, I examine the ways that distributed leadership and mediation can facilitate dialogue and problem solving, through mastering and modeling critical empathic skills and power balancing, to ensure the most inclusive and productive process possible with contemporary knowledge.

The term ‘sustainable development’ is officially defined in *Our Common Future*, the 1987 Brundtland Report commissioned by the United Nations, as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”(p. 16). More than twenty years later, this definition continues to be the guiding post for much of our institutional understanding about sustainable development. In practice however, sustainability has been much more difficult to implement and is often debated, especially as it relates to the increasingly complex challenge of addressing climate change. What does this definition of sustainable development mean for people, communities, and political systems trying to interpret it on a day-to-day basis while making complicated decisions about fossil fuels, food production, clean drinking water, or biodiversity? Even if we are able to agree upon a definition, what is needed in order to make challenging decisions, particularly when groups involved are polarized? And can mediation, along with resonant, collective leadership play a role in this process given an increasingly interconnected world where environmental conflicts are expected to intensify?

BACKGROUND

At the time that *Our Common Future* was written, it was considered groundbreaking work that would guide policymaking toward a more environmentally sustainable future.

While it marked progress and an increasing understanding of our changing and interrelated global conditions, the implementation of the ideas outlined in it have fallen short of the challenge before us. The UN document concluded that:

In its broadest sense, the strategy for sustainable development aims to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature.

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