Chapter 5
Sustainability

ABSTRACT

Organizations of all kinds must increasingly take into account not only the simple bottom line of their organizational operations, but also address their sustainability in broader terms. This chapter reviews sustainable development and the various definitions of sustainability accepted in the literature and in organizational practice, including what has become known as "Triple Bottom Line" (tbl) sustainability. The complex systemic properties of sustainability are detailed, and the general status of sustainability as an organizational, national, and global priority is characterized. The importance of organizational learning in achieving sustainability is explained, and important guidelines are outlined for sustainability performance measurement and reporting, including Corporate Social Responsibility and the Global Reporting Initiative. Details of attempts by various individuals and organizations to address sustainability in practice and how they achieve positive results are described, and latent opportunities to express leadership are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the various definitions of sustainability accepted in the literature and in organizational practice, including the mainstream definition based on what has become known as "Triple Bottom Line" (tbl) sustainability. This tbl view of sustainability addresses the harmonizing of three critical elements of the sustainability system, namely in simple terms: economic viability, social justice, and environmental preservation.

To successfully undertake tbl sustainability requires courageous far-sighted leadership capable of addressing multiple conflicting imperatives - capabilities traditionally in short supply. Even in the past when sustainability simply implied organizational viability based on profitability and/or longevity, this old sustainability paradigm proved exceedingly complex if not impossible to maintain, and today Bob Doppelt claims " … the need for a clear understanding of how to lead and maintain organizational change toward sustain-

ability has never been greater" (Doppelt, 2010, p. 40). Unfortunately the world is embroiled in economic challenges at every turn, and organizations of every stripe are battening down their hatches in an attempt to ride out the "perfect storm" they are experiencing. The result is a decreasing interest in any sustainability imperatives that do not relate to weathering the storm.

Nevertheless, global positions concerning the ethical operation of organizations have been forced to improve in the face of ongoing scandals and disasters and, not withstanding economic woes, pressure continues to mount for organizations of all kinds to take into account not only the simple bottom line of their organizational operations, but also to address sustainability in broader terms, where sustainable development means giving attention to the systemic dynamics of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural interactions; That is, meeting the needs of today without sacrificing future generations' sustainability. In a sense tbl sustainability may be conceptualized as a *process* or *pathway* with *transitional phases* unfolding over a long (or maybe infinite) time horizon, where sustainability is viewed as an ongoing process taking place between ever-changing, self-organizing systems (Hawkin, 2007).

Such complex systems and their interrelations are characterized by continual change and development, ongoing feedback across micro and macro levels, and by co-evolving bottom-up and top-down development (Espinosa & Porter, 2011). This view of sustainability necessitates recognition of the sustainability journey as a hugely dynamically complex system involving multilevel national and international protocols, agreements, and enforcement, as well as business specific rationalizations, strategies, and actions. Unfortunately, as Rogers (2012, p. 28) contends "As the film, 'An Inconvenient Truth' exemplified, it is easier to sketch out the complexity of the problem than to create solutions that set organizations, and thereby, the global economy on a different path."

Because there has been a shifting of public and consumer opinion to value not only profitability, but positive social and ecological efforts, organizations have to 'appear good by doing good'. A leader must view sustainability as an opportunity rather than a problem - complex and challenging, but worthwhile commercially when well strategized, and meaningful from an ethical and public policy point of view. Furthermore, the notion that sustainability is solely the responsibility of governance or senior management is seriously outdated, and indeed sustainability is the responsibility of every individual regardless of their organizational or social role. Leaders at any level in any context must strive to learn to optimize and satisfy the appropriate leadership role for their situation, and such organizational learning offers enormous sustainability opportunities.

As Wasdell (2011, p. 19) noted in relation to development of sustainability "We face the daunting task of developing and applying processes of organizational learning in such a way that the skills can be embedded fractally in all levels of institutional life." However as Pourdehnad and Smith (2012) make clear, although in the early part of the millennium the importance of organizational learning for sustainability was stressed by a number of authors (Natrass & Altomare, 1999; Senge & Carstedt, 2001; Molnar & Mulvihil, 2002; Smith & Scharicz, 2011), Fenwick (2007) is one of the few to address the practicalities of how organizational leaders might foster such learning. This chapter draws on the research of these and other authorities to present details of organizational learning research and practice particularly relevant to sustainability.

In grasping sustainability related opportunities, leaders must, according to their role and abilities, consistently strive for development of a long term organizational strategy that will achieve worthwhile economic, social and environmental results as well as foster a sustainability-centered culture that values and rewards equitably the contributions of all its stakeholders (employees, suppliers,

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