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A Model for Implementing a Successful Sustainability Strategy

Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” — Sun Tzu

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Introduction

April 20, 2010 will forever be a date Americans remember. It will be especially remembered if you live along the Gulf Coast. That is the date of the “Deepwater Horizon oil spill” or the “BP oil disaster” tragically occurred. It would become the largest oil spill in history. We may never obtain an exact figure of the amount of oil that gushed into the Gulf of Mexico from the sea floor, but it will ostensibly exceed hundreds of millions of gallons.

The resulting oil slick covered over 2,500 square miles and was visible from space. The BP oil disaster had and will continue to have immense impact on human, marine, and wildlife habitats and behavioral patterns. Just as Exxon will be forever associated with the Valdez oil spill in 1989, BP will never jettison its new corporate identity. BP has spent more on newspaper ads pronouncing its commitment to righting this wrong than it invested in installing preventative safeguards to have avoided this disaster altogether.

The full effect of the BP oil spill on the psyche of the consuming public has not yet been revealed. The attitude of the consuming public will be sickened by the loss created in years and decades to come by unchecked mismanagement fueled by corporate greed. Long-term consequences may signal a cessation of business partnerships and consumers with Bp as well as with other organizations operating without the overriding goal of achieving sustainability in its business operations. Robert Johnson points out in *The Business Review* that: “No company wants a reputation for being a discriminating employer, tolerating unsafe working conditions, or being an environmental polluter. It is difficult, costly, and time consuming trying to live down a bad reputation and recreate a good one” (Johnson, 2009).

A *Consumer Report*-type analysis of an organization’s level of sustainability in its operations has already become a motivating reason influencing the consumer to purchase a product or

service or a potential investor to execute a financial commitment. There are already established global metrics such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) used to assess the social, economic, and environmental performance standards of an industry, albeit much of the reporting is not always audited for accuracy.

Michael Hopkins wrote in the fall of 2009 that one-way sustainability will change management and that “businesses won’t be able to keep from ‘bumping into’ it – and being forced to change as a result” (Hopkins, 2009). Hopkins further emphasizes how many organizations are being motivated to address the issue of sustainability before it becomes a part of their strategic agenda.

Companies who readily embraced sustainability as a core factor of their systems management will prosper over those who are forced to change because of consumer pressure or additional, avoidable disasters. This is a current saying the “if you have not been invited to the dinner, you will be on the menu.” This warning is a key motivator in doing the “right thing.” Hopkins asserts that there would be “first mover” advantages associated with leading your industry in this direction. Experts often “argue that when sustainability impacts an industry, its effects are more pervasive than typical market-changing forces. Being ahead, they say, will matter more” (Hopkins, 2009).

All real change is grounded thinking and perceiving Charles Kettering opined, change, yet it is the only us progress”(Cook, 1993). viewed products and

[W]hen sustainability impacts an industry, its effects are more pervasive than typical market-changing forces.

in new ways of (Senge, 2008). As “The world hates thing that has brought The way consumers services were already

undergoing change and events such as the BP oil disaster has expedited the changeover process. What might have been a few years away is now going to happen more suddenly. In 2007, 68% of the top 250 global companies listed in the Fortune 500 embraced corporate responsibility and sustainability as primary objectives (Colbert, et al, 2007). BP was among one of the adopting companies, aptly demonstrating that the talk has not yet been walked. However, consumer pressure will increasingly demand proactive action and genuine change.

Role of Human Resources (HR)

The role of HR will change to reflect the strategic contribution that must be embraced for an organization to prosper. “Vickers (2005) stated that human resource management is the organizational area that presents the greatest potential for incorporating sustainability” (Jabbour, et al, 2008). Losey and colleagues (2005) visualized many opportunities where HR could improve its company’s commitment to achieve more sustainable operations by adding critical operational competencies and exerting strategic leadership (Wirtenberg, et al, 2008). Jabbour and Santos argued that this perspective is reinforced by Eisenstat (1996) who stated that “the human resource functions have a central role in organizations” (Jabbour, et al, 2008). I believe their analyses fall short of arguing that human resources must be an integral part of the executive committee and not just function as an administrative, subordinate branch.

Colbert and Kurucz hold that by linking HR principles to the company’s triple bottom line sustainability objectives, the company would experience a lasting industrial advantage while

building capabilities for positive change (Colbert, et al, 2007). Different leadership disciplines espouse varying concepts defining sustainability with respect to their organizational operations. Financial groups regard sustainability differently than human resource management groups. Therein lies a critical role for the HR professional to perform:

- Create awareness of the impact of sustainability on the organization of today and tomorrow.
- Foster a uniform understanding within the organization regarding the purpose of sustainability.
- Develop and implement the best plan of operational sustainability that will create organizational alignment and long-lasting adherence.
- Create and implement leadership development programs.
- Find and develop talent management.
- Monitor and make changes in cultural diversity awareness and programs.
- Foster an atmosphere of cooperation and teamwork.
- Develop and monitor appropriate guideline metrics.
- Identify and engage all stakeholders associated with the organization.
- Communicate the company's objectives to all levels of its workforce.

“Forward thinking HR leaders in triple bottom line sustainability focused organizations can use the framework” they have at their disposal “to bring clarity to the strategic dialogue in their companies, and can help build the alignment capacity to convert dialogue into action” (Colbert, et al, 2007). Very few HR professionals are well skilled in sustainability. “As a result, business decisions about critically important sustainability issues may be missing the input of those who have a deep understanding of implicit HR challenges.” (Wirtenberg, et al, 2008).

HR specialists are not typically perceived as top business leaders. In an organization that has already embraced sustainability, the role of HR is most likely recognized and utilized, although it does not possess a position of leadership. HR professionals need to develop their own competencies to become better equipped for these challenges. It is often viewed that HR is a reactive function. Once assigned a task, HR will simply perform what has been dictated from the top echelon. “I see little initiative from the HR area. They are reactive; if they are given something, they’ll do it, but they are not the leaders in the company.” This statement was given by one leader of a company in a study conducted for an article published in *Human Resource Planning 30.1*. (Wirtenberg, et al, 2008). Deutsche Telecom has moved sustainability from its HR department to the office of the CEO (Lacy, et al, 2010). To best summarize this situation, Robert Louis Stevenson pronounced that:

“Wherever we are, it is but a stage on the way to something else, and whatever we do, however well we do it. It is preparation to do something else that shall be different”
(Cook, 2007).

This statement applies to all change, at any time. One of the difficulties of change is its lack of permanence. It is also one of the greatest wonders of change. This is the challenge of implementing a sustainable strategy in any organization. It will be a temporary implementation subject to improvement. What will not change is the imbedding of sustainability as a core value of an organization.

For change to take root and prosper requires the belief of all involved that this is supported by senior and middle management and that it benefits everyone. This is where HR's role becomes vital to the success of the program. "Because of the lack of HR involvement in most sustainability efforts, many organizations are making many unnecessary implementation mistakes" (Wirtenberg, et al, 2008).

The process of creating an effective sustainability plan and the ability to execute the strategy associated with it comes down to "people systems, education and training, change management, and employee and stakeholder engagement - [which] falls squarely in the 'sweet spot' of the HR function" (Harmon, et al, 2009). Professionals in the HR field will need to step forward to engage their respective organizations in moving forward toward a sustainable strategic strategy. "HR now has the possibility to redefine its charter and to lead the way on a journey where there are few maps and few experts" (Rimanoczy, et al, 2009).

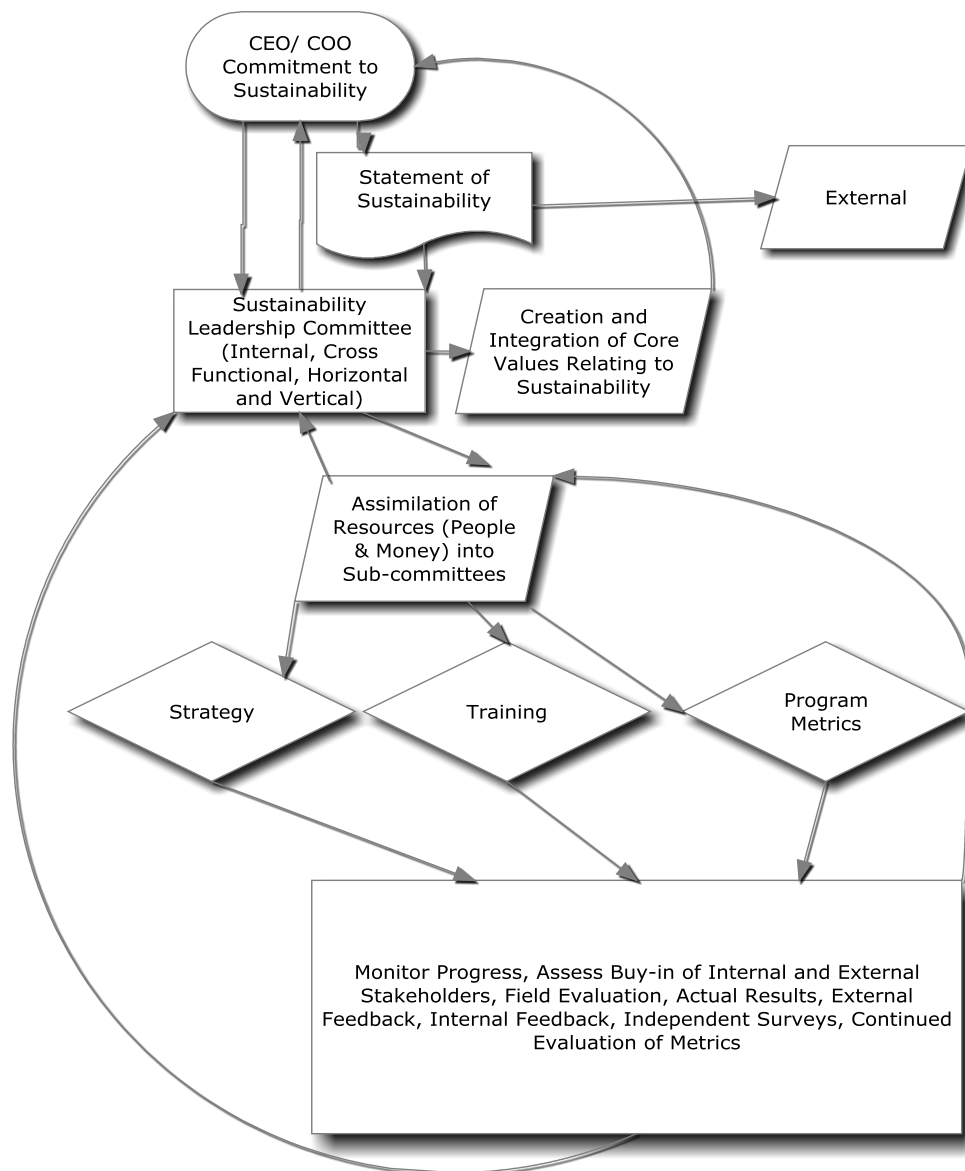


Diagram 1:
Critical
Attributes of the
Successful
Implementation
of a
Sustainability
Strategy

Successful implementation of a sustainability culture in any organization would include the following several critical attributes:

- A. Acceptance, support, and passion of senior management.
- B. Sustainability must be a core strategic value for the organization.
- C. Processes and procedures must be aligned around sustainability throughout the organization and be integrated across all functions.
- D. These processes and procedures must be associated with measurable targets that are assessed regularly.
- E. Employees require communication, training, and encouragement.
- F. All stakeholders should be engaged.
- G. Sustainability should become second nature to everyone associated with the organization.
- H. Communication.

Acceptance, Support, and Passion of Senior Management

A business executive spoke of new business models with sustainability as a major strategy, the challenges presented, and the dual requirements of patience and persistence: “The other thing you have to remember is that you have to have a lot of tenacity, and patience too. This is not a one-trick pony. You can’t do it for a day, a month, you can’t do it for a year – you have to really believe in it” (Colbert, et al 2006). My father was employed in the insurance industry and regularly communicated with CEO and CFOs. It was the rare and outstanding organization that refused to turn on the car engine unless everyone had a seat belt or that insisted on wearing a hard hat and ear plugs when simply taking a shortcut through a plant. Safety and loss prevention were core values of that organization. Those passionate executives led by example, prompting the next level of employees to emulate their ways...until it simply became a way of doing business.

Change begins at the top. “It always starts at the top” (Johnson, 2009). Universities change direction when deans change, businesses change direction when CEOs change, and nations change direction when the leaders change. The State of the Union Address proclaims the direction of the new administration; it is filled with various statements and promises – all imbued with the essence of change. From an organization viewpoint, all the company’s stakeholders should be informed about the CEO’s vision and implementation of concrete efforts integrating sustainability in the work environment. Several firms now use a particular letter template to accomplish these objectives. Many university leaders have endorsed and joined the American College & University President’s Climate Commitment. However, despite good intentions, many statements issued and actions undertaken by well-meaning institutions are inevitably mere marketing tools and lack the necessary commitment to implement real change.

Statements intended to integrate sustainability throughout an organization should:

- Be concise, authentic, and sincere;
- Be free of jargon and ambiguities;
- Clearly explain expectations;
- Align with managerial actions; and
- Motivate and encourage all stakeholders.

The following is a proposed declaration addressed to an organization's stakeholders which could be used by companies to communicate a strong position and adequately relate its efforts to embrace and develop sustainability:

Statement of Sustainability

Our organization continually works to achieve and maintain business success. Illegal, unethical, or unsustainable practices are not acceptable and will never be tolerated. Our reputation is earned every day by the manner in which we conduct ourselves, both by words and actions. We are citizens of the planet and we will do what is right. And that is the only way we will conduct business.

"To conduct our business with integrity in a lawful and responsible manner, we have to be alert to situations that pose ethical questions. We need to have a good understanding of our values and the laws that are pertinent to the work we do and the decisions we make. And most important[ly], we must use good judgment in deciding what course of action is most appropriate" (White, 2009). We will not accept plans that have potential harmful environmental consequences to achieve better returns. We will achieve these returns in a manner respectful to future generations.

I cannot reduce to written format all the rules and guidelines we all must follow for all situations that will arise. I have to rely on you to protect our name and our environment through the exercise of good judgment. If you encounter an inability to address a particular situation, you are encouraged to seek guidance from the company's leaders as to the proper course of action. If the necessary, do not hesitate to contact me personally. It is imperative that the right course of action is always followed.

Many of you occupy customer-related positions. We must respond to their needs in a positive fashion. We believe that it is vital to have consistency between short-term goals and long-term strategy. It is critical to balance our growth and efficacy in society. Balance does not mean compromise, but does require adaptation to change. In this manner, we will become good stewards of the resources we have been given and preserve them for future generations to also use, enjoy, protect, and preserve.

Sustainability is one of our core characteristics. We have established the following strategies and correlating objectives which we will strive to fulfill within the next 36 months. I will report to you on a quarterly basis as to our progress.

- *Derive 25% of our income derived from sustainable, innovative activities.*
- *Reduce waste by 35%.*
- *Improve energy efficiency by 50%.*
- *Reduce Co2 emissions by 75%.*
- *Reduce lost workdays.*
- *Hire a sustainability development officer by the end of this year.*
- *Double the resources currently allocated to our social responsibility programs.*
- *Develop programs to assist our stakeholders to make sustainability an integral part of their lives.*

I am committed to making sustainability as one of our key core values to be achieved and practiced not only by our associates but by our managers and leaders as well. We all need to constantly measure and reassess our sustainability practices and programs.

Let us hear from you. Together we will create a better organization and serve as an example to others. Sincerely, President and CEO

Sustainability as a Core Strategy

In an effort to measure sustainability, in 2010 the United Nations Global Impact Initiative conducted a survey of its 766 Global Compact member CEOs and conducted an additional 50 interviews of other senior business leaders around the world (Lacy, et al, 2010). A principal conclusion drawn was that sustainability will not only be a separate business initiative, but it will become fully integrated into the strategy and operations of an organization (Lacy, et al, 2010).

A core value is part of the essence of an organization. It remains unflinching when everything else changes. Companies such as Proctor & Gamble have come to view sustainability as a critical component of its business paradigm and strategic values. P&G has posted its purposes, values, and principles (PVP) throughout its facilities and in its literature. In this manner, employees are reminded of and guided by the core values of P&G. The PVP is described as “the DNA of the company” (White, 2009).¹

In 2007, P&G’s PVP were changed to reflect the importance of sustainability as a core value:

“We provide branded products and services of superior quality and value that improve the lives of the world’s consumers, now and for generations to come.”

To further clarify this statement, its commitment to sustainability was specifically added:

“We incorporate sustainability into our products, packaging, and operations” (White, 2009).

Natura Cosméticos is a cosmetics company based in São Paulo, Brazil. Sales exceed 2.3 billion USD annually and have increased by over 40% within the last three years since incorporating sustainability as a core value of its business strategy. “Placing sustainability at the core of its business strategy has given Natura a significant advantage in promoting its brand and reputation, and has helped the company to grow from a small local enterprise to become Brazil’s largest cosmetics firm” (Lacy, et al, 2010).

Sung-joo Kim is the Chairperson and CEO of Sungjoo, a South Korean luxury goods and fashion retailer. She has stated that: “Sustainability started as a moral obligation, but has now become a key differentiator for consumers” (Lacy, et al, 2010). If an organization fails to recognize the needs and desires of its customers and incorporate these as part of their core values, it is placing itself at a tremendous disadvantage, both short and long term. According to Idar Kreutzer of Storebrand ASA, “The risk of inaction is the greatest risk facing business” (Lacy, et al, 2010).

When an organization assumes the task of changing its purpose, it is a defining statement. It demonstrates that something is so important that it has to be made clear that the position change is what defines the organization. Incorporating sustainability as a part of the “DNA” of an organization will drive decisions and behaviors at all levels of the company’s operations.

When A.G. Lafley, CEO of Proctor & Gamble, emphasized his company’s resolute position on sustainability, he opined that P&G had fashioned a clear business strategy: “Our focus is on providing products and services that don’t require consumers to make choices between sustainability and their needs for performance and value” (White, 2009).

¹ P&G’s PVP are fully stated at <http://www.pg.com/sr>.

Uniform Integration of Sustainability

One way to impede the success of any strategy is to have it solely “owned, controlled, and dictated” by corporate management. Changing this is viewed by the CEOs interviewed by the Global Compact as the most difficult challenge to the implementation of sustainability (Lacy, et al, 2010). The opposite position holds the key. The strategy must be owned, controlled, and integrated into the various business units and departments of the company and embraced by all of the company’s stakeholders. Proctor & Gamble would label this tactic as its “enabling strategy” (White, 2009). Such strategy engages and equips each employee with the tools needed to integrate sustainability-thinking into their daily activities. Although the overall corporate strategy remains the bedrock of the business paradigm, the individual units, departments, and employees must additionally develop their own sustainability goals.

Accomplishing great things generates and the commitment to do more. It is exciting and infectious, especially when the participant witnesses the importance of his or her input and contribution. This type of “enabling strategy,” employed by P&G, is delineated in three goals:

- ❖ Raise awareness of the sustainability initiative and the internal programs adopted by the organization.
- ❖ Actively engage employees in achieving this objective.
- ❖ Provide training for all relevant functions demonstrating how sustainability is part of the responsibility of all stakeholders.

In its efforts to facilitate the integration process, P&G established a Global Sustainability Leadership Council. The purposes of the Council are to assist in developing corporate strategy and to resolve integration issues between units, departments, or individuals.

Often operating units and subsidiaries became part of an organization through mergers or acquisitions. These issues can then become an indispensable part of the different entities with the proper planning and over time.

Measurable Targets

Simultaneously with changing the company’s purpose, P&G launched a corporate sustainability strategy and five-year goals associated with such strategy:

“Strategy 1. Delight the consumer with sustainable innovations that improve the environmental profile of our products” (White, 2009). By 2012, P&G planned to develop and market \$20 billion in cumulative sales of sustainable innovation products. This objective qualifies as a measurable target.

“Strategy 2. Improve the environmental profile of our own operations” (White, 2009). By 2012, there would be a 10% reduction — per unit produced — of energy and water consumed, Co2 emitted, and disposal waste.

“Strategy 3. Improve lives through our social sustainability programs” (White, 2009). By 2012, 250 million children would be reached through P&G’s “Live, Learn, and Thrive” programs and 2 billion liters of clean water would be furnished to those in need (White, 2009).

“Strategy 4. Engage and equip all P&G employees to build sustainability thinking into their everyday work” (White, 2009). This is the “enabling” section previously discussed.

“Strategy 5. Shape the future by working transparently with stakeholders to enable continued freedom to innovate in a responsible way” (White, 2009). Good ideas can come from many places and P&G’s partners have collaborated to develop new ideas under an open innovation strategy. The associated goal was that by 2012, 50% of the innovations marketed would be derived outside the company.

When individuals are engaged in a process and witness the benefit to them and to others, exciting things occur. At P&G, 2 years after the aforementioned targets were established, others were added or intensified.

Communication, Training, and Encouragement

Sierra Nevada Brewing Company has embraced a culture of sustainability and has since it started in 1980. As a part of its overall functions, the company’s human resources department has consistently developed and improved upon policies and procedures that support employee engagement and facilitate a workforce commitment to the stated corporate goals and commitment to implementing sustainability efforts. There are formal suggestion processes and employee-managed continuous improvement groups which encourage the proposal of sustainability-related changes to corporate operations. If such innovations are adopted by the company, these employees are rewarded through the performance management and special recognition programs (Casper, et al, 2010).

SNBC has a new employee orientation process that encompasses the role that sustainability plays at the company. This organization is attempting to ensure that there is a firm understanding of company principles. This induction process begins on the first day for each new hire and through training and the benefit structure, sustainability is emphasized as integral to SNBC’s business culture.

While golfing at a private club in the Laurel Highlands of Western, Pennsylvania, I noticed that the club’s employees referred to me as “Mr. Brauer.” I subsequently discovered that this unsolicited gesture of respect was a uniform characteristic of the business’s employees and was not acquired through any type of training or managerial dictate, but represented a core quality of the employee.

In the study performed by The Global Compact, 86% of the CEOs recognized the importance of increased and enhanced training for managers and employees regarding sustainability, but only 60% believed that their respective organizations had accomplished that objective. In the same study, 76% expressed that sustainability metrics should be included in assessing a worker’s performance, while less than half said this measure had already been implemented. As per the Compact’s findings: “Building the capabilities of employees and embedding sustainability metrics in performance assessment will be critical steps in the journey toward integrated sustainability.”

Engaging the Stakeholders

Over 100 apparel companies and retailers, have jointly developed software to help measure the total environmental impact of various items it makes or sells — from apparel to footwear. The metrics assess the impact beginning from assembling raw materials until disposal of the item: cradle to grave. The objective is designed to produce a particular “eco-value” which is displayed on the item’s tag — similar to the use of energy star ratings (Binkley, 2011). Christina Binkley further states that sustainability is proving to be a defining motivating

factor for the consumption of most products. “It’s been shown to be an effective way to lure shoppers to try new products” (Binkley, 2011).

The rating is a result of assessing the type of material, transportation, packaging, washing methods, and other factors in the life of the product. The process also measures the sustainability methods (or lack thereof) of the company’s suppliers. Transportation, packaging, and disposal methods are all gauged. One shoe company reduced the price of its boxes by over a third by reducing the silica bags and tissues used. Although this rating system is still in its initial phase, the involvement of all stakeholders in the process is already proving beneficial.

The Inculcation of Sustainability

Communication

“Managerial communication is one of the most important tools that FMs [Frontline Managers] can utilize” (Ahmed, 2010). FMs establish rapport with their staff through effective communication. Such communication can result in either a positive or negative reaction. Managerial communication is defined by Bell and Martin as “the downward, horizontal, or upward exchange of information and transmission of meaning through informal or formal channels that enable managers to achieve their goals” (Ahmed, 2010).

A statement on sustainability is a great start but it would not be very effective by itself. It needs to be further disseminated within the organization, both verbally and in written format, and applied uniformly to all levels of labor and management. In order to achieve the organization’s goals, employees must have confidence in the management of the organization and believe in the message it conveys. Uniform application means that when all must sacrifice for the company, this must be a collective effort. Management cannot insist on this measure for its workforce while spending thousands of dollars on elaborate corporate dinners and private jet travel. Thus, it is vital that the message be true for everyone in an organization. Then people will embrace it and be creative with complying with and further developing the message. They will feel a sense of empowerment as their feedback is taken into account.

It is also important to note that communication must be open in all directions. The best ideas will most likely germinate from the front lines. Those closest to the delivery of the product or service will be the first to hear or recognize where improvements can be made.

Conclusion

The process of implementing sustainability within national and international corporate functions is more than a challenge. For any option to be effective, any sustainability strategy must first have “CEO and Senior Management commitment” (Baier, 2010). The sustainability team must employ the correct leadership knowledge and skills. All stakeholders must accept and participate in the strategy of sustainability as a core business value. This core value must be clearly understood and associated with an unambiguous and measurable set of targets and goals. Finally, these values must be communicated throughout the organization in a manner that lets all stakeholders realize what is being accomplished and how they can help be a part of the change.

Education allows us to learn from the successes and hardships that others have experienced so we can better prepare ourselves for a similar journey. Peter White relates several valuable lessons that P&G learned from its incorporation of sustainability measures:

- Be explicit.
- Understand that sustainability is not added work, but it's the only way **to** work.
- No trade-offs.
- Maintain a clear strategy.
- Make sustainability part of the company's DNA.
- Stay the course (White, 2009).

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Author Biography

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