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White Paper

# Organizational Development for Sustainability

By Georges Dyer & Michelle McKay | Aedi Group

How to attract and retain top talent to gain a competitive advantage while creating a better world.

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There is an explosion of awareness and interest in sustainability among college students and young professionals today, and a surge in demand for careers that are in alignment with personal values of helping others and creating a better world. Amid the web of complex issues that dominate the American psyche—terrorism, war, global warming, the Internet, extinctions, partisan politics, China, oil, international trade—more and more people are seeing that everything is interconnected. We are coming to the realization that we are all a part of these issues in one way or another and we want to be a part of the solutions.

Increasingly, individuals are looking for advice on how they can align their professional careers with their personal desires to help people and the ecological systems upon which we all depend. A lawyer was looking for guidance as he quit his high-paying job at a corporate bankruptcy firm to move into the renewable energy space. A woman was making one last attempt at inspiring her team of twenty-year real estate veterans to green their property management business before she jumped ship and started applying for jobs at green real estate development firms. In *The Sustainability Advantage*, author Bob Willard presents the high costs associated with these losses.

Much of our identities are wrapped up in our careers. Add to that the connections between ecological impacts and social suffering and it's no surprise that promising young professionals are looking for meaning and opportunities to make positive contributions to the world through their work. With baby boomers retiring en masse, businesses are left scrambling to attract and retain the best talent.

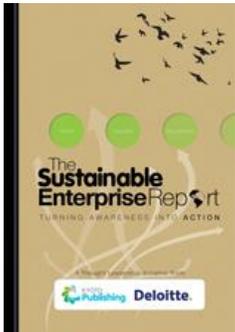
## Reaching Sustainability Through Strategic Organizational Development

Maintaining a competitive advantage in today's increasingly resource-strained global economy is more complex than ever before. Added pressure comes from stakeholder resistance in the form of regulations, boycotts, protests, litigation, and bad press. It takes a top team, knowledgeable about sustainability, to stay in the smart zone ahead of regulation, to lead effective proactive stakeholder engagement, to reduce risk, maintain a good corporate image, and find areas of opportunities for eco-efficiencies. Organizations that work with natural systems and understand the context that businesses and their employees exist within will begin to operate in ways that build our natural capital and maintain healthy communities.

The challenge now is to infuse a strategic approach to sustainable development throughout the organization. Before getting started, it is important to set the inspirational goal of becoming a sustainable organization and demonstrate top-level support. The old adage, "what interests my boss fascinates me," holds true. Then a four-step process becomes very useful.

Step one involves getting everyone on the same page, so that people throughout the organization understand enough about sustainability, and the system in which they are operating, to contribute to the goal. Here, four sustainability principles originally articulated by The Natural Step organization provide a succinct expression of sustainability. These principles state, that in a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:

Concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust, Concentrations of substances produced by society, Or degradation by physical means. In that society, people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.



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- FT Investing in a Sustainable Future March 24, 2010, New York

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Step two is to identify current sustainable and unsustainable practices, based on whether they contribute to violating these principles in any way. Step three involves contextualizing the organizational vision within basic sustainability constraints, imagining the organization in that sustainable future and looking back to the present to determine what was done to arrive at that position of future success, where the principles are no longer violated. Step four is to create a flexible plan with prioritized actions that will eliminate, in a logical and feasible manner, any activities that systematically undermine social and ecological systems. Using this approach of "backcasting" from the future instead of only forecasting from the present can liberate organizations from running the risk of extending the problems and negative trends of the past into the future. Companies can then develop strategies and evaluate actions to effectively move the organization toward sustainability, while being efficient with resources in the process. This approach-strategic sustainable development-provides a common framework for moving large groups toward sustainability.

Establishing a big-picture context and a strategic direction are crucial steps, but they are just the beginning. People and the processes of change that are continuously experienced add many layers to the complexity of organizational development. Businesses are often thought of as single entities, but in reality they are groups of people, each with their own goals, motivations, theories, strengths, and weaknesses. To foster alignment among these groups, the sustainability vision can be the beacon that burns brightly, guiding strategy and sparking innovation. It can excite current employees and attract new ones who see the organization's goals aligned with their personal goals. But to be successful in strategic sustainable development, the organization must also catalyze transformational change and empower leadership at all levels.

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### Creating the Foundation of a Shared Vision

The entire team must be aligned with each other and enabled to implement the sustainability strategy.

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Employees are expressing concern around sustainability issues and want to feel their personal and professional lives are aligned. A sustainability vision is an effective and compelling message to foster purpose and meaning. A shared vision of an attractive future within the constraints of sustainability principles promotes innovation by establishing creative tension between a desired sustainable state and our current unsustainable reality. Rules foster creativity. Without the guidelines of grammar and

semantics, it would be impossible to differentiate between great works of literature and the meaningless jumbled prose of those unwanted e-mails that end up in our spam folders. Without rules, football would just be a group of people running around with a ball. The creativity unleashed through sustainability constraints can drive innovation, as well as cultivate personal fulfillment and boost morale, which are all necessary for successful strategic sustainable development.

In addition, the entire team must be aligned with each other and enabled to implement the sustainability strategy. Top-level support and engagement must be clearly demonstrated through active participation in the sustainability strategy and integration of sustainability aspects into the job descriptions and performance evaluations of all employees. Team members must be enabled to participate in the strategy and enact transformational change with capacity building, delivered through explicit and implicit learning opportunities.

### Leading Change from Within

A recent Business Week article, "Little Green Lies", featuring Auden Schendler, executive director for community and environmental responsibility at Aspen Skiing Company, tells the story of how difficult it can be to create an organizational culture engaged in sustainable development. Aspen Ski Co. has been a progressive leader in this space, as has Schendler, who hails from the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI). According to Schendler, competing business priorities can stall or derail important, longer-term sustainability plans. Amory Lovins, a founder of the RMI, attributes Schendler's frustrations to insufficient support from his superiors. Aspen Ski Co has a clear, explicit, visionary goal of sustainability, but still seems to be struggling with the transformational change necessary to get there. A business is not likely to enjoy all the benefits of successful strategic sustainable development without a deep and continuous process of leadership and learning at all levels of the organization.

Transformational change can happen in many ways and will reflect the unique culture and circumstances of the organization. In addition to external education and internal training, organizations can support the development of dialogue and listening skills, create space for conversation as a business tool and allow time for reflection and self-directed work. For example, Google encourages its engineers to spend 20 percent of their time on projects that interest them, regardless of the apparent relevance of these projects to their job description. In a 2006 presentation, Google's vice president of search products and user experience estimated 50 percent of new products launched come from this 20 percent of employee time. With an informal company motto of "don't be evil," Google has also been able to attract top talent, contributing to outstanding financial success and significant strides toward

sustainability. This is a company known for its innovative culture and leadership in change.

Infusing a strategic approach to sustainable development throughout an organization is not easy work. Both the people and the issues involved are complex and a reductionist approach of trying to break apart the problems and solve each one in isolation will not work. The plan must be continually refined in an iterative process, reinforcing the vision and refining the strategy as the playing field changes over time, while constantly developing the organizational capacity for sustainable development. It's hardly easy, but the benefits for organizations that lead the way are great and costs of inaction or delay are potentially catastrophic, both for the individual organization and global society as a whole.

Corporate Social Responsibility; Sustainable Enterprise;

\*Footnotes

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