Overcoming Organizational Impediments to Strong Sustainability Management

Dave Robinson and Mark Boulle
Central Queensland University
Australia

ABSTRACT

With frequent corporate collapses and global market failures, the financial and economic systems of the Western world are coming under ever increasing scrutiny. These events, and a deeper introspection, call into question the roles played by firms in embracing sustainability practices. A firm's resources are combined to apply its unique capabilities to the challenges of the external environment, industry forces and its competitors. In so doing firms must meet the twin strategic objectives of maximizing shareholder returns to create a sustainable future (for the firm) AND maintaining a responsible approach to sustainable development in areas impacted by the firm.

Whereas resources may be classified as tangible or intangible, it is the intangible resources, including the firm's reputation, organizational effectiveness, and innovation propensity that comprise the foundation for sustainable competitive advantage. The development of business-level culture has been portrayed as a six-step journey (Robinson, 2007). Systemic constraints may inhibit the development of organizational culture just as personality disorders may afflict individuals. It is asserted that the so-called big five individual personality traits (McCrae and Costa, 2003) can be related to three categories of organizational pathology (Robinson, 2010), which in turn impede effective sustainability management practices.

Additionally, it is proposed that sustainability practices in firms may take one of three forms, namely non-sustainability, weak sustainability, and strong sustainability. Whilst it is clear that all firms ultimately need to embrace a culture that supports and encourages strong sustainability, to date very few have managed to do so, being either unwilling or unable to go beyond the non-sustainable or weak sustainability levels.

This paper relates the importance of organizational wellness as a prerequisite for strong sustainability. In so doing it forms a bridge across the fields of organizational psychology and business sustainability by relating the problems encountered in firms as they face the challenges of consistently having to align day-to-day managerial practices in such a way as to form business cultures that are congruent with strong sustainability. Inconsistency or mal-alignment of practices, over-emphasis on the negative aspects of management style, and/or an unwillingness to adapt are impediments to the adoption of an effective sustainability strategy.

Keywords: sustainability, values journey, firm pathologies, organizational culture

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has been defined broadly by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). While it may be difficult for the firm to embrace such a vague definition (Fraser 2011), and one can certainly appreciate that it might engender a certain *creative ambiguity* or *malleability* (Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz, 2005), it remains none-the-less imperative that firms give attention to sustainability issues.

Accepting the difficulties associated with sustainable behavior in the current economic system (Gazibara & Chapple, 2011; Jackson, 2010; Porritt, 2003; SANZ, 2009), UK economist Tim Jackson argues ‘perpetual economic growth based on unbridled consumption is simply unsustainable in a finite ecosystem and inherently lacking in common sense and vision (Jackson, 2010). A report produced by *Sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand (SANZ),* outlines a “strong sustainability” (SS) model whereby all human life and actions are contained within the biosphere- which is the Earth- a self-contained system except for sunlight received, heat reflected into space and external gravitational effects. Within the biosphere is the socio-sphere where societies function, and within the socio-sphere a subset of human actions, known as economy- the econo-sphere. SANZ puts forward the strong sustainability model in replace of the Triple Bottom Line model which it says in practice: ‘at its worst, translates as the “Mickey Mouse” model whereby economy is the largest circle with social and environmental fringe ears.’ This traditional TBL model gives large priority to the economy over the eco and socio-spheres, intensifying global non-sustainability and leading to failures of ecosystems, climate change, societies and economies themselves (SANZ 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Gould (2011), the three dimensions of sustainability, namely economic, social, and environmental, are interconnected, and whereas there can be tradeoffs between the dimensions, they can also be regarded as complementary to each other. For example, positive environmental principles in a company may be attractive to potential investors, thus encouraging economic investment (Gould 2011). Drawing on contemporary research by Jackson (2010), Porritt (2003), and SANZ (2009), three levels of sustainability have been identified. These are summarized as follows:

1. Non-sustainability – this is characterized by behaviors that directly and negatively affect all three dimensions of sustainability. The firm displays no regard for the environment and society aside from its own self-serving interests.
2. Weak sustainability - where considerations regarding social and environmental sustainability are subordinated to economic considerations. This type of sustainability represents the current norm among businesses.
3. Strong sustainability – the ultimate level of sustainability where strategic decisions are made with due regard to the environment first, then society and finally economy. The underlying logic is that the environment must be maintained and rejuvenated on account of the finite nature of the resources available in the ecosphere.

The table below depicts the three levels of sustainability management in organizations.

Level	1	2	3
Referred to as:	Non-sustainability	Weak-sustainability	Strong Sustainability
Firm's regard for Economic Sustainability	Short-term view	Medium-term view	Long-term view
Firm's regard for Environmental Sustainability	Complete disregard	Cursory regard	Highest priority
Firm's regard for Social Sustainability	Complete disregard	Self-serving	High priority

Table 1: Three Levels of Sustainability Management

For organizations the question of what needs to be sustained remains largely unresolved (Kates, Parris and Leiserowitz, 2005). Though it is not surprising that achieving sustainability in the organization is a real and constantly evolving challenge (Haugh & Talwar 2010), it is one that firms can no longer afford to ignore. The integration of sustainability into the repertoire of organizational responsibilities, though not yet mandatory, is becoming more urgent. To appease stakeholders and legitimise a company's place in the community, sustainability reporting is now a necessity (Asif et al., 2011). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and triple bottom line (TBL) reporting, along with sustainability assessment models have become tools for corporates to measure, justify and promote "sustainable" behaviors (Asif et al. 2011; Fraser 2011).

While sustainable development has been a consideration in some companies for more than two decades (MacLean, 2010), many of the actions taken by firms may be seen as little more than green-washing (Ramus & Montiel, 2005), representing, at best, weak sustainability (SANZ, 2009). Company statements have tended to be broad and sweeping and more indicative of political correctness, focusing on public and staff expectations rather than actual company strategy and objectives (MacLean 2010). The debate has now moved from *whether or not* firms should invest in sustainability to *how* this is best done (Robinson, Kleffner & Bertels 2011).

The role of culture in sustainability management

Strategy development is an attempt to forge sustainable competitive advantage. By combining resources the firm hopes to create core competencies. Resources may be tangible or intangible. Tangible resources include physical factors (such as product and location), financial resources and technology. Intangible resources include the firm's reputation (often related to its brand equity), organizational capability, and innovation propensity. It is predominantly the intangible assets that form the firm's culture, which develops over time and ultimately permeates every aspect of the business. Business culture is supported and strengthened by the day-to-day managerial processes adopted by the firm. Galpin (1998) refers to these as the organizational influence systems. Although ways to implement each of the essential managerial practices are theoretically many and varied, in practical terms aligning the organizational influence system requires that the managerial practices are not only congruent with the firm's phase of development, but also consistent with each other. From a sustainability perspective, what is needed is the willingness and ability to implement practices that support and encourage strong sustainability throughout the firm. The firm, being a collection of the individuals comprising it, develops a certain culture. The culture is essentially comprised of the way the firm collectively thinks feels and behaves, and its values are lived out through its day to day practices. When firms employ day-to-day practices that correspond to those commonly associated with their particular phase of development, they may be regarded as normal. Essentially there is congruence between what is required of the firm and what it manages to accomplish.

Firms that fail to consistently apply managerial practices that fall within the normal range, or are incongruent with the requirements for effectiveness in business, however, may be said to be constrained in their development. An example might be a firm that over-emphasizes profits at all cost, neglecting to manage sustainability, giving insufficient weight to its stated values, or ignoring its ethical responsibilities. As Galpin (1998) pointed out, a necessary change to one of the influence systems unavoidably affects others. To that end an appropriate model is needed against which to explore the critical path of business-level culture development. An understanding of the development of business culture may be aided by the Values Journey (Robinson, 2008), which consists of three phases (see figure 1).

	Phase 1 Unaware of business requirements	Phase 2 Mastering the economics of business	Phase 3 Holistic business leadership
Fully autonomous leadership	n/a		Step 6 Empowered by holism
Developing leadership autonomy	Step 2 Driven by fear	Step 4 Reliant on deal-making	Step 5 Empowered by consensus
Low capacity for autonomous leadership	Step 1 Driven by obedience	Step 3 Reliant on compliance	n/a

Table 2: An abbreviated conceptual depiction of the Values Journey (Robinson, 2008)

The Values Journey (Robinson, 1998) depicts the three phases and six steps through which a firm progresses. For the purposes of this paper we will ignore the details surrounding the chasms through which the firm must pass to progress (ethical, absolutist and holistic), and concentrate on the fact that the journey is divided into three phases of development, namely: 'unaware of business requirements, 'mastering the economics of business, and 'holistic business leadership. These three phases are believed to correspond to the three levels of sustainability, namely 'non-sustainability', weak sustainability' and 'strong sustainability' previously introduced (see table 1).

Personality Disorders in Firms

It can be said that the firm that remains 'on track', so to speak, during its various developmental phases will be capable of implementing the required mix of actions to maintain long-term effectiveness. Clearly those would include strong sustainability, in the modern-day interpretation of effective business strategy.

As with individuals (Graves, 1974), the development path to a healthy, functionally mature, sustainable firm may be viewed as a step-wise journey, where each step is intended, alternately, toward both greater autonomy or responsibility (Robinson, 2007). Firms develop one step at a time to re-align their organizational influence system across the various dimensions of business-level culture, including: the people they choose to employ; their approach to employee development; the way they ensure performance; the way they give recognition and reward; the way people may earn a promotion; the style of management; how the work is structured; the way they communicate within the firm; how they solve problems; what they view as worthwhile opportunities. The six most common steps have already been depicted in table 2.

Each step is characterized by both positive and negative manifestations in each of the dimensions, such that every firm tends toward the adoption of an internal way of working that relates to the critical mass of thinking, emotions and behaviors. What is essential is that the resultant *business culture* keeps pace with the firm's stage of development. When that is the case the firm's managerial practices may be said to be in congruence. When the managerial practices within each dimension are implemented consistently in accordance with the congruent value station then the firm's culture may be said to be consistent. When those practices are manifested predominantly in the positive the firm's culture is regarded as healthy. A firm that can accomplish congruency, consistency and positivity in the manifestation of its managerial practices is said to be perfectly aligned and may be considered ready to embrace strong sustainability.

A firm that allows its culture to stray out of alignment opens itself to a so-called 'personality disorder' (Robinson, 2010). A firm that then chooses to remain 'out of alignment' perpetuates erratic behaviors, thereby displaying the symptoms of a pathology. Three pathologies have been described (Robinson, 2010). The first, type A, is when the firm exhibits only the negative traits of its value station, rather than the positive. We refer to this firm as Mad, i.e. angry, as characterised by dysfunctional systems, stressed employees, and self-destructive management decisions. The second, type B, is where the firm advances in most dimensions but remains trapped in, or inappropriately connected to, lower value stations in some. The firm is thus riddled with inconsistency in its day-to-day practices and thereby creates a confused culture, in which performance is erratic, and dissonance occurs frequently. Such a firm is referred to as Bad. The third, type C, is where the firm suffers from arrested development, being incapable of advancing along the values journey, as a result of it's systems, processes and people becoming enrenched at the low level value stations. Known as a Sad firm, symptoms include inappropriate over-reliance on duty-compliance, leading to obsessive-compulsive behavior, avoidance and dependencies, such as those associated with *work-aholicism*. Because such firms know no better, they do not recognize themselves as being self-constrained. In a sense they are incapable of seeing beyond their current stage of development. An example would be where a company has introduced recycling practices in some departments but not others. Table 2 shows this classification of personality disorders in firms, with their corresponding symptoms, as they have previously been related to personality disorders in individuals (Robinson, 2010).

Disorder type	A	B	C
Cause	Negative traits of value station	Inconsistent management practices	Arrested cultural development
Symptoms	Stressed	Erratic	Avoidant
	Dysfunctional	Confused	Dependent
	Self-destructive	Dissonant	Obsessive-compulsive
Label	Mad	Bad	Sad

Table 3: Personality Disorders in Firms

As can be seen in table 3, the *mad* firm is one where the dominant day-to-day practices are experienced as negative manifestations of its stage in the values journey. The *bad* firm is one in which the day-to-day practices are inconsistent, leading to erratic behavior. Finally, the *sad* firm is one suffering from immature emotional responses. To ensure organizational wellness (lack of personality disorder in the firm) the firm needs to develop its day-to-day practices with appropriate thinking patterns, behaviors and emotional responses.

Prevention and treatment of pathologies

To avoid pathology A, managers must ensure that the firm is managed predominantly in the positive aspects of the appropriate value station. For example, where the communication around sustainability goals is concerned, rather than negotiate (positive) or manipulate (negative, both level 2) they should encourage participation and consensus building (both positive and level 3). Instead of stubbornly imposing a set of policies (level 2), they should communicate the logic underlying them, thereby negating mistrust or suspicion, and instead building support and commitment (level 3).

The pitfalls pertinent to pathology A, and the virtues to be pursued in the interests of organizational wellness, are depicted in table 4.

	Phase 1 Unaware of business requirements	Phase 2 Mastering the economics of business	Phase 3 Holistic business leadership
Virtuous leadership to ensure organizational wellness	Improvization leading to innovations e.g. in waste management	Re-channelling profits to meet social needs e.g. TPL and CSR	Active engagement in holistic sustainability strategies
Pitfalls pathology A	Sweat-shop/slave labor	Mercenary / materialistic	Indecisiveness

Table 4: Pitfalls of the MAD firm (pathology A) and virtues needed to ensure organizational wellness

As can be seen in table 4 above, the type of leadership behaviors required to negate pathology A in the MAD firm are different at each phase of development. To overcome the tendency toward the regard for labor as simply 'hands' and not 'brains' at phase 1, leadership should be intended toward energizing the workforce toward basic innovations, such as forms of improvization directly related to tasks. At phase 2, the leadership responsibility entails broadening the scope of managerial decisions to include corporate social responsibility (CSR) and triple-bottom-line (TPL) metrics. In phase 3, the firm is poised to engage in holistic strategies, the leadership of which ensures that indecisiveness is not allowed to constrain sustainability.

To avoid pathology B, managers must ensure that the firm's day-to-day practices are experienced as indicative of the appropriate value station. The firm should be careful to manage all the dimensions of its culture in a congruent and consistent way. To effectively introduce sustainability programs, management must therefore ensure that they hire people with the requisite knowledge and positive attitude, approach employee development strategically, ensure performance toward stated objectives, give recognition and reward, etc. (all dimensions) in the appropriate way, i.e. consistent to the firm's level of development.

The pitfalls pertinent to pathology B, and the virtues to be pursued in the interests of organizational wellness, are depicted in table 5.

	Phase 1 Unaware of business requirements	Phase 2 Mastering the economics of business	Phase 3 Holistic business leadership
Virtuous leadership to ensure organizational wellness	Consistency of character; tough love mentoring	Coordinated, goal-specific multi-disciplinary project teams	Strategic focus on a few specific sustainability projects
Pitfalls pathology B	Favoritism, bias, random bullying	Uncoordinated systemization (machine bureaucracy)	Lack of follow-through; numerous 'do-good' initiatives

Table 5: Pitfalls of the BAD firm (pathology B) and virtues needed to ensure organizational wellness

As can be seen in table 5 above, the type of leadership behaviors required to negate pathology B in the BAD firm are also different at each phase of development. To overcome the tendency toward the favoritism, bias or bullying at phase 1, leadership should be directed toward the development of character in followers, even though at this level of organizational culture such mentoring is most likely to consist of 'tough-love'. At phase 2, the enemy of progress is the strict adherence to traditional procedures and communication channels (machine bureaucracy; Mintzberg, 1989), which must be superceded by well-coordinated projects aimed toward the achievement of defined medium-term business goals by personnel working together, combining complementary functional skills. In phase 3, the firm's leaders can ensure that the collective energy intended toward holistic change isn't fragmented or misdirected, replacing he 'shotgun approach' (multiple unfinished initiatives) with specifically identified strategic projects that advance sustainability issues that are important to the firm and its multiple stakeholders.

To avoid pathology C, the firm must ensure that it has brought all of its managerial practices to a congruent level. In the example of a firm engaging in a waste recycling project, having successfully piloted the project in one department it would need to extend the recycling program across all departments before continuing to further advance sustainability practices in the first.

The pitfalls pertinent to pathology C, and the virtues to be pursued in the interests of organizational wellness, are depicted in table 6.

	Phase 1 Unaware of business requirements	Phase 2 Mastering the economics of business	Phase 3 Holistic business leadership
Virtuous leadership to ensure organizational wellness	Multi-tasking; training and development	Big picture thinking with goal-alignment	Coordinated sustainability strategies that encourage engagement at all organizational levels
Pitfalls pathology C	Myopic workplace awareness (own direct task only)	Obsessive attention to detail	Avoidance of issues that may disturb workplace harmony

Table 6: Pitfalls of the SAD firm (pathology C) and virtues needed to ensure organizational wellness

As can be seen in table 6 above, the type of leadership behaviors required to negate pathology C in the SAD firm also differ at each phase of development. To overcome the problem that is often prevalent in early-stage firms whereby employees are unaware of the impact of their tasks on downstream activities and ultimate effect on the customer service experience and brand image, leadership should ensure that staff are appropriately-inducted into the firm, and offered opportunities for further training and development through the likes of multi-tasking programs. At phase 2, one of the most likely pitfalls is the habitual obsession with detail, i.e. inability of staff to see the 'big picture', which makes it difficult for the firm to advance toward fulfilling its business goals in a coordinated way. In phase 3, the firm's leaders need to guard against a cultural bias toward the avoidance of conflict (or anything that might disturb workplace harmony), by encouraging the engagement of staff at all levels in the organization in identified and measurable sustainability initiatives that are coordinated so as to support the firm's overall vision, mission and long-term effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

So how may a developing firm avoid becoming sad, bad or mad and maintain organizational wellness that supports strong sustainability? The following guidelines are proposed to ensure that the firm's practices remain in alignment as it embarks on its stepwise journey to maturity:

1. Development of a corporate vision that includes sustainability
There must be a clearly articulated vision for the overall organization. Whilst it is certainly desirable that all firms will one day aspire to level 3 sustainability, the need for progress through the three phases of organizational development means that each firm's vision must be consistent with the appropriate identifiable value station. For example, if the company includes in its corporate vision statement that it strives to become the market leader, then it is placing itself, at least aspirationally, at the success-striving station. By so doing it places the bar, so to speak, for all day-to-day practices to be aligned with success-striving. Unless sustainability issues are clearly articulated, they may subordinated to sales success, even if inadvertently.

2. Assessment of adherence to the vision
Management needs to take stock of how the firm's practices currently measure up to those implied in the vision. For example, to what extent is the concept of 'market leadership' understood and regarded as a driving force. Achieving management ownership of the process is the most critical factor for success in any area and can be an enormous challenge. Beyond immediate business priorities, leaders need to also offer quantifiable targets and unambiguous policy statements to back up terms like 'sustainability' and 'corporate social responsibility'.

3. Articulation of values

Appropriate organizational values should be discussed to create a sense of holism throughout the organization. Mismatches may occur and give rise to organizational conflict when employees' personal values are disregarded by perceived organizational values (as experienced through the firm's day-to-day managerial practices). An illustrative case is, for example, where sales employees request remuneration based on performance, rather than straight salaries, resulting in a stand-off between policy-wielding financial controllers and results-eager sales directors.

4. Ongoing development
Senge (1991) established the concept of the learning organization. This concept implies the setting of a work environment where people are encouraged to constantly develop their capabilities and produce the results they truly desire, while working towards a common goal. Maclean's (2010) sentiments are pertinent: Sustainability issues need to become a core business concern not simply presenting green-product development and marketing opportunities. Going green is not just another philanthropic endeavour and/or an additional cost that is not core to competitive position. Sustainability is central to competitive position and fundamentally important to business. It is this strategic, long term view of sustainability that businesses need adopt.

5. Monitoring
Expectations and performance measures should be identifiably congruent with the firm's phase of development. An important element in all of this is the feedback loop, whereby leaders themselves may assess the effectiveness with which they are achieving congruency by regarding their followers' responses as a mirror that reflects their own approaches. Ultimately, that will enable the custodians of the organization to continually adjust the degree of emphasis placed on the vision and the values necessary to lead the firm along its developmental journey.

6. Leadership
Regardless of which development phase a firm may find itself at, the fact remains that, according to Yukl (2009:52), 'Collective learning focused on improving long-term performance is more likely to occur when key stakeholders agree that it is important and will help them to achieve their individual objectives'. So there is an essential need for business leaders to not only set the strategic direction but also to harness the energies of their organizational members toward the collective and co-responsible achievement of the firm's strategic goals. Leaders who demand compliance or a token annual social responsibility report are, by reducing complex issues to routine, detracting from the innovative challenges of strategic leadership and the creation of a deeper understanding of long term sustainability implications. Furthermore, as this paper has indicated, leaders must harness responsibility for organizational wellness and the negation of pathologies, such as the Mad, the Bad, and the Sad, by proactively pursuing virtuous leadership practices that avoid the pitfalls associated with each of the pathologies.

These recommendations are supported by recent sustainability literature. For example, Maclean (2010) suggests companies should take a harder look at the strategic significance of sustainability issues. He believes those firms that take the initiative to identify emerging dynamics and develop processes and practices for sustainability stand to gain a competitive advantage. In the case of established companies, the challenge is to break existing moulds of thought and practice, to go beyond simply green-washing in marketing efforts. This is a resounding warning against the pitfalls of pathology A. Haugh and Talwar (2010) identified challenges to embedding sustainability across the organization. Firstly, they state that there are differences in the rate of changes in the firm's external environment, employee learning and the impact of corporate action to address sustainability. They assert that since company resources are finite, and the range of issues around the three sustainability dimensions many and varied, it will be inevitable that some issues take priority over others. Secondly, they point out that teaching and learning opportunities in sustainability are still subject to employee enthusiasm, interest and motivation to learn, therefore raising employee awareness about sustainability issues may simultaneously increase expectations of what the organization can do, fuelling an expectation-performance gap. These are tantamount to warning against the pitfalls of pathology B. With reference to small or new firms, Maclean (2010) outlines the predictable path of business challenges and opportunities as that of building the business *around* sustainability principles, thereby growing the firm in a healthy way from the beginning. Essentially this approach may be likened to the need to negate pathology C.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The prospect of sustainability becoming ever-more important as well as the increasing sense of urgency around the need for firms to become engaged in strong sustainability raises opportunities for further research in this area. In particular the authors would recommend empirical studies to address the links between a firm's phase of development in organizational culture and its level of sustainability, as well as the significance of the prevalence of pathologies as impediments to strong sustainability management.

CONCLUSION

The need for firms to embrace sustainability management is urgent. Three levels of sustainability have been described, namely non-sustainability, weak sustainability and strong sustainability. While it is desirable for firms to engage in strong sustainability (level 3), few have been willing or able to do so to date. As more pioneers embark on the developmental journey toward strong sustainability, the vortex they create will compel others to follow suit. As firms interact within industries and influence each other, their suppliers and others in their business networks, more firms will be inclined to pursue sustainability goals. But the development of a firm's value system, and therefore its organizational culture, takes place in three phases. It is no coincidence that the phases of development correspond to the three levels of sustainability management. Therefore firms need to start to develop astute sustainability management practices that ultimately lead to strong sustainability. Additionally, the prevalence of one or more pathologies impede firms from advancing to strong sustainability. Personality disorders manifest as three types of pathologies in firms in which day-to-day practices are inconsistent or incongruent with their phase of development. To avoid developing pathologies, firms must cultivate organizational wellness by having clearly articulated aspirational visions for their future, constantly monitoring their managerial practices to ensure that they adhere to the articulated values, and applying effective sustainability leadership with congruency and consistency.

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