Human Values and Sustainability: Can Green Swim Upstream?

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A human value is the “desirable” that influences the selection of our actions (Williams, 2000). “Values-in-use”—are those values that actually influence our decisions and actions, as opposed to values that are “espoused” but do not influence choices of action (Argyris & Schön, 1996). We focus on those human values that lead to decisions and actions that influence sustainability.

Changing Values

Changes in values-in-use can be seen in our schools, businesses and all levels of government. For example, a value-in-use that has changed over time is evident in the statement, “Cheating is okay if you don’t get caught” (Whitley, 1998). This “desirable” is self-serving and displaces the old “desirable” value of integrity.

Historically, we as a nation make claim to specific human values, such as honesty, hard work and the Golden Rule. Also, our nation embraces democracy and democratic principles. Today’s businesses, universities, governments and religious congregations proclaim adherence to these historic values.

Yet, these values are no longer dominant in many institutions. They may be espoused, but they do not influence behaviors, as evidenced by the recent spate of scandals in corporate and public life. Instead, a new set of values-in-use has been gaining strength, and is now embedded in many parts of our society, especially business. We believe these values will hinder efforts toward sustainability. Such values and their consequences are readily seen in some major corporations. And, because of the dominance of business in society, the role it plays in re-establishing sustaining values may determine the fate of human civilization (Speth, 2008).

Sustainability: Reversing Underlying Forces

Sustainability has come to mean many different things and has, in part, become synonymous with the term, “green.” To the extent that “green” focuses primarily on the natural environment and on short-term efforts, it falls short of addressing the larger scope of sustainability concerns. “Sustainability,” as we use it, is captured in the more holistic, longer-term perspective of the Brundtland Commission Report in which sustainable development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Report of the Brundtland Commission, 1987). Sustainability takes into account societal, as well as environmental issues, and views these as highly interdependent.

Many experts claim the time is fast approaching when downward trends in the planet’s life-support systems will accelerate, and reversal will no longer be possible (Hawken, 2007; Stern, 2008). Contemporary business and society foster values like growth and consumption that tend to run counter to community values (Speth, 2008). This, in turn, prompts actions that degrade life-support systems. Such values-in-use, like growth and consumption, enable and reinforce the perceptions, beliefs and actions that seep into the structures, procedures and systems of organizations. Woven into their fabric, they become self-justifying and resistant to change.

Outcomes of these values-in-use include autocratic hierarchy, extraordinary differences in pay, limited transparency, deceitful practices and short-term profits as the major objective, and limited regard for society and the environment. Toyota CEO’s recent admission to Congress that the company shifted its emphasis away from safety to favor growth exemplifies this. The sustainability problem is systemic, so corrective actions must address the whole system, including its fundamental driver—human values (Horkheimer, 1941).

Just as bad money drives out good money, bad values drive out good values. Ghoshal (2005) points out how academic theories built on a set of negative values, like focusing on shareholder value at the exclusion of other things, form the foundation for business practices and become self-fulfilling prophecies. Indeed, Harris (2009) found that while the application of agency theory was intended to align the interests of shareholders and managers, the evidence indicated the opposite. Similarly, Leavitt (1989), Handy (2002), Marshall (2004) and Mitroff (2004) all have expressed deep concern over the loss of vision and values in business education.

Some organization leaders understand the need for substantial change and are “going green.” They have taken significant actions to better serve society and to limit damage to the environment. However, the depth, scope and urgency of the sustainability challenge will require a greater response—not only in time and effort, but also in creativity, innovation and fundamental changes in lifestyles and existing practices.

For instance, Ray Anderson, founder of Interface Carpet, made a commitment to make the company carbon neutral by the year 2020. The people at Interface welcomed the challenge. The company reports significant environmental improvements and substantial cost savings. We believe these results have been generated because of the human value of caring for others, the environment and the future. We doubt that others can meet the challenge without embracing values that provide the context that enables actions to emerge that align with sustainability.

Swimming Upstream

Many green initiatives, prompted by external pressures to consider the triple-bottom line of people, planet and profits, increase efficiency and/or reduce waste, thereby providing creative ways to increase profits. These green initiatives are consistent with current values and require no fundamental change in values-in-use—they are “swimming downstream” green initiatives. Wal-mart’s cost-saving sustainability initiatives, like saving energy, are easy to implement because they align with company values and culture—“swimming downstream.”
The problem is that doing what is consistent with contemporary values-in-use will not bring about the fundamental changes needed to fully address sustainability issues. Much more difficult to undertake or maintain are initiatives that conflict with corporate values—that “swim upstream.” Ray Anderson (1998) refers to “climbing sustainability mountain,” implying that “going green” gets steeper and harder.

Contemporary values-in-use will not bring about the fundamental changes needed to fully address sustainability issues.

HR is no stranger to swimming upstream. Long-term development programs that conflict with short-term financial goals are sometimes swept away when, for example, HR may be encouraged to increase short-term profitability by outsourcing special skill needs and downsizing, rather than developing current employees.

**NON-SUSTAINING VALUES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES**

Non-sustaining human values are those “desirables” that are not aligned with sustainability—the well being of people and planet, present and future. Sometimes non-sustaining values are extreme or perverted forms of historically desirable values. For example, personal well being, when balanced with the well being of others, reflects the value of equity. However, when personal well being disregards others, the value can transform into greed. When disregard for the “other” is manifested at the corporate level, it can negatively affect the climate, water and air quality—earth’s life-support systems. Greed is, therefore, a non-sustaining value.

While there is limited research on the role of human values and sustainable development, “most advocates for sustainable development recognize that for it to be realized would require changes in human values” (Leiserowitz, Kates, and Parris, 2006, 441). The three value sets that follow are frequently cited as contributing directly or indirectly to problems that make sustainability more difficult to achieve: individualism and hedonism (Etzioni, 2002); non-democratic values (Twomey, 2006; Leiserowitz, Kates, and Parris, 2006); and pretence of knowledge (Hayek, 1989, Ghoshal, 2005).

**Individualism and Hedonism**

Individualism, which can be a desirable trait when the situation demands it (the rugged individualism of pioneers), has become largely a non-sustaining value, as in “What’s in it for me?” When individualism rises to the level of dominance, it threatens such human values as equity, mutuality and community. Individualism is evidenced in the workplace when behaviors are externally motivated and controlled through a system of personal rewards. These reward strategies are justified by claims of increased productivity and profits. Yet, much of the literature suggests the opposite, especially when it involves creativity, initiative and/or cooperation (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Singh and Krishnan (2008) report that they found positive relationships between self-sacrifice, altruism and transformational leadership, which, in turn, is related to collective identity and perceived unit performance.

Similarly, the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human right, but taken to the extreme, it can be a non-sustaining value that does not align with sustainable choices and actions. Advertisers spend millions developing ads that entice customers to buy, whether or not the goods or services are actually good for the customer. For example, in response to a recent ban on chocolate milk in a school cafeteria because of high sugar content, the milk industry launched a campaign to encourage its consumption, arguing that chocolate milk is better than no milk (Brady, 2009). So, what is really being sold? We suggest that it is mostly pleasure or privilege—intangibles associated with feeling good and fostering the value of hedonism.

When individualism and hedonism predominate in a society, the resulting attitude can be, “What is the least I can do to get what I want?” This combination of values directly runs counter to those needed to effect a sustainable society, including equity, community, generosity, trust and the desire to make a contribution.

**Non-democratic Values**

Democratic principles constitute a set of human values shared by citizens of the United States and other countries throughout the world. Democracies are, ideally and by their nature, “of the people, by the people and for the people.” People, not their leaders, have the ultimate say. The peoples’ influence is exercised through choice, and that choice is most effective when it is exercised in a free, informed and uncorrupted forum.

Many large U.S. corporations operate in a manner inconsistent with democratic principles and the values that ensure an effective democracy (Twomey, 2006). Handy (2002), ranked second in 2001 among the most influential living management thinkers by Thinkers 50, wrote, “It is ironic that those countries that boast most stridently about their democratic principles derive their wealth from institutions that are defiantly undemocratic, in which all serious power is held by outsiders and power inside is wielded by a dictatorship or, at best, an oligarchy.”

For many organizations, their employees, supply chains, consumers and the communities impacted by them have little or no voice in decision making. Over time, corporate values have replaced traditional human values throughout society—particularly monetary gain over well-being of people and planet (Speth, 2008). Sharon Beder (2008), a noted educator and author, stated, “[T]he market values of competition, salesmanship and deception have replaced the democratic ideals of truth and justice.” Likewise, in discussing the impact of today’s corporations, Fotopoulos (2008) observed, “Increasingly, there is little room for the expression of higher human values and qualities such as generosity, compassion, selflessness, willingness to seek out and expose the truth, and courage to fight for justice.”

**Knowing and Certainty (Pretence of Knowledge)**

Being perceived as knowing and being right has increasingly become desirable in our society and organizations (Yanow, 2009). In contrast, humility and a willingness to learn opens minds to the influence of others and new ideas. For example, it is the non-sustain-
ing value of certainty that leads some to deny global warming outright, in the face of substantial evidence to the contrary. Conversely, some promote global warming and deliberately limit debate on the topic. This desire to be right and not be challenged, which occurs at all levels, not only makes for bad decisions but also makes change nearly impossible. Leaders who “know with unquestioned certainty” operate within fixed ideas and goals, and are unlikely to collaborate with others or explore the complexity and dynamics of larger systems (Sharma, 2000; Boiral, Cayer, & Baron, 2009). Incorporating sustaining values into corporate strategies and processes will require systemic and paradigm-shifting change.

SUSTAINABILITY PATH: What HR Can Do

The sustainability path refers to going beyond what is typically perceived as “green.” Popular green initiatives, while noteworthy and necessary, are not enough to transform the company to be fully sustainable. An examination of the current values-in-use can begin a shift in both operations and processes as a first step on the path to sustainability.

What is the path to aligning business with sustaining human values? A good place to start is the Stockdale Paradox (Collins, 2001) that contains two sustaining qualities, integrity and trust. Stockdale’s principle was, “Face the brutal facts, and keep faith in a positive outcome.”

First, face the brutal facts: (A) Consumers and the public are right in their dismal assessment of corporations and leaders (Edelman Trust Barometer 2010 reports recent tenuous rises after recording 10-year lows); and (B) Corporations have played a key role in weaving the fabric of non-sustaining human values into society (Speth, 2008). Second, keep the faith: (A) We need to believe in a sustainable future and act to transform ourselves and our organizations for the purpose of preserving planet and people; and (B) Make this our passion and, along with others, inquire about and build a new paradigm for the corporation and society—one that incorporates human values that are aligned with sustainability (Hamel, 2009).

HR: Create a Dialogue

Because engagement of people is fundamental to transformational efforts, HR is perfectly poised to support the organization as the custodian of human values. To initiate a dialogue about the transformation of values-in-use for the purpose of attaining sustainability objectives, HR can take the following steps. First, HR can start an internal assessment of its own values-in-use using a dichotomy of HR practices (See Chart 1).

1. A Beginning

A major vehicle and context for promoting the sustaining values is community. As Block (2008) indicates, community is the place where the level of trust, connectedness and common purpose allows us to name and let go of the past to create a different future. As a beginning, HR can strengthen its own community around the common purpose of creating greater value for the firm and society by examining and shifting values-in-use. The HR unit could use items in Chart 1 to name (acknowledge) non-sustaining values-in-use and develop possibilities for new values. Throughout this process, HR must learn how to create a context for itself and others that will foster a paradigm-shifting dialogue.

Chart 1 distinguishes between two sets of practices—non-sustaining and sustaining—and provides an effective way to differentiate and examine values-in-use. By moving to the sustaining practices, and changing values-in-
values is difficult because they exist not only at the personal level but also within the fabric of the organization—in its processes, structures and reward systems. Hamel (2009) gives 25 examples of ways to change the fabric of the firm to transform its ability to meet the challenges facing the world.

HR’s greatest contribution to the organization and to the organization’s stakeholders may be to create a dialogue that will shed light on the corporation’s values-in-use and thereby leverage change. The positive, sustainable values the firm claims are often espoused values—not its values-in-use. Closing the gap between sustainable and non-sustainable values needs to be approached in a way that allows change to emerge rather than be forced. A first step is to help people to see the gap and its consequences for behaviors related to sustainability, such as innovation, creativity and motivation. A next step is to tap the knowledge of the organization to better understand the systemic nature of the gap. A cross-organizational dialogue will highlight the gaps and open possibilities for aligning values (and thereby practice and behavior) with sustainability. The process through which the firm achieves this will be unique to each situation, as it relates to the current challenges the company faces. Typical HR avenues for building a dialogue include employment decisions, performance appraisal, training/development, reward and recognition processes, work/life balance practices, employee surveys and company-wide events. Through such activities, HR can initiate a series of dialogues among employees by asking some focused, exploratory questions.

Based on the responses to these questions and on the values to which the organization is committed, HR can seek ways to embed the desired values into HR processes. For example, reexamine recruitment materials,

1. Do our values-in-use in the corporation/organization enable a high level of creativity, innovation, adaptability and internal motivation throughout the organization? What current values-in-use limit or promote these behaviors?

2. What are the values-in-use with respect to top management, hierarchy and control, rewards and punishments in the corporation/organization? What is the impact of those values and resultant practices on our unit?

3. What are the values-in-use in our unit? How are they integrated? Are they acknowledged?

4. Do we operate in an environment of transparency where information is openly shared? What are the values-in-use that encourage or discourage transparency?

5. What are my/our personal/family/community values-in-use?

6. How are my/our values-in-use different from corporate/organizational values-in-use?
reconsider where recruitment takes place and ask whether the questions asked of candidates might be changed to better reflect the values needed to advance the sustainability of the organization, its people and the greater community, and so on. These efforts can be part of a continuous cycle of inquiry and learning.

3. Engaging the Organization in Transformation
A third step, beyond the HR unit and HR’s major roles, is to engage the entire organization as a partner in transformation. A likely first partner is the unit most responsible for sustainability. As in the other steps, the action is co-created from the possibilities that emerge from a broad-based dialogue between units. Now the focus shifts to the organization level and its strategy and operations.

The following activities might be helpful in a dialogue. These items are not steps, but rather they offer places to start a dialogue. Most important is the trust, openness and commitment that enable people to have the courage to surface and share their values, assumptions and beliefs. This is not about HR creating solutions or programs for others. This is people taking responsibility for their values-in-use and the behaviors they prompt.

1. Raise awareness of the current values-in-use
Inquire. What are customers, employees, and the public telling us and other corporations like us about our role in society and the world? What are the values that have contributed to the non-sustainable behaviors and outcomes of the firm? Where are the gaps? What values-in-use do the gaps reflect?

2. Acknowledge the current values-in-use and their negative consequences.
Create an internal dialogue across the organization about how customers, employees and the public view the business. Surface the values-in-use that underlie the positive or negative actions/feedback. In particular, surface those values-in-use that block the firm from moving forcefully toward sustainability.

3. Develop a new set of core values-in-use
Together, make a list of sustaining values-in-use that might prompt innovative, trusting and transparent behaviors and outcomes for the customers, employees and the public, as well as for the firm. Possibly, start with the values-in-use that drive one’s own passion.

4. Compare the new set with corporate values
In an honest assessment, most firms will find major gaps between their corporation’s claimed values and their current values-in-use. Surface and acknowledge the gaps and show how current values-in-use are part of the fabric of the firm, affecting its external relationships, its strategies and its HR practices. Also, individuals must take personal responsibility for being actively or passively part of this fabric. Explore the fabric—for example, language, processes and structures.

5. Align HR practices and values-in-use
Together, develop a strategy driven by those values-in-use that are the new core of the firm. The change in values-in-use will substantially change, as well as strengthen, the strategy formulation process.

Using “Trust” to Demonstrate How HR Can Begin a Transformation
A key characteristic of “best companies” is the establishment and maintenance of trust between an organization and all its stakeholders, particularly in the context of organizational transformation (Collins, 2001).
Trust, a positive expectation of intent and outcomes, is reinforced and becomes a virtuous cycle when expectations are met consistently. The diagram that follows illustrates the cycle. A business establishes trust by its values-in-use, such as honesty, freedom, equity and mutuality (sustaining values) manifested in the behaviors that those values prompt. For example, honesty might prompt the corresponding action of “accurate information flow.”

When a corporation has non-sustaining values-in-use, such as individualism, non-democratic principles and certainty, negative behaviors and outcomes can lead to a vicious, downward cycle. When a corporation “espouses” sustaining values while acting on non-sustaining values-in-use, cynicism results and trust is eroded.

For employees and other stakeholders to trust a company, a company needs a long-term commitment to the alignment of its actions with stated sustaining values. (See Diagram 1) A deep long-term dialogue is facilitated by a shared mutual intent that is more than the company’s need for profit, such as transforming the company’s role in society.

Conclusion

Every organization must find its own way forward as it faces a highly dynamic and competitive marketplace. Putting human values into the conversation is a means of distinguishing the level and types of change to pursue and how current values are supporting or limiting objectives. Comparing the “business case” with the “sustainability case” provides alternative perspectives on the type and level of change desired. The business case is usually about incremental change—change within the current processes and authority structure—with a primary focus on the financial impact. The sustainability case is about benefitting society and the environment, where profit is more of a means to that end (Collins, 2001; Hamel, 2009).

Higher levels of sustainability require transformation of major approaches and processes that are driven by a set of human values different from those pertinent to the business case. The business case assumes a high level of knowing, first by those who propose, document and provide the rationale for a project, and then by the managers who give approval. Embedded in the business case is a process involving top-down direction and control consisting of a set of procedures, communications, job descriptions and appraisal and reward systems. The business case is well-suited for incremental change and fits well with dominant current values.

The “sustainability case” is a different paradigm for business—one that supplants the “business case.” The sustainability case, in which societal and environmental concerns play a pivotal role, is about collaboration, openness to emergence, self-organizing, community building, internal motivation and a robust systems perspective (Twomey, 2006). It is less about knowing, certainty, hierarchy, reward-driven behaviors, individual well-defined responsibilities and short timeframes (Twomey, 2006). The sustainability case is aligned more with creating a long-term sustainable future. Moreover, it provides the means for the transformation needed to make this possible.

References

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