

## IN PRACTICE

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### **Sustainability Is More Than Crushing Cans: Leadership Principles for Creating Healthy Organizations**

*By Michael Kroth*

Sustainability is a hot topic these days. Leaders tout green initiatives. Politicians, actors, and CEOs are now ersatz environmentalists. Perhaps your organization recently jumped on the bandwagon, trying to focus your goals in an “eco” direction. Suddenly you are trying to leave zero carbon footprints and reorient your business plan to take advantage of the new demand for environmentally friendly products. Good for you! The environmental danger to our planet--perhaps the most important issue of our times--and the legacy we leave our grandchildren will largely depend upon how responsible we are about tackling it.

Still, if you are an organizational leader, you are interested in not only how healthy the physical environment is but also in how vigorously your company, association, or department will thrive over time. Will it live or die? In today's highly competitive, ever-changing environment, it's adapt or fail. And you don't want to be on the corporate endangered species list. Organizational sustainability includes, but is more than, adopting practices that will make our world more environmentally viable.

#### **Applying what we know**

I recently asked human resource professionals from Idaho's Treasure Valley what they consider organizational sustainability to be and how human resource professionals contribute to it. I also wanted to know what they thought were the most important ways that occurs. They came up with three main areas related to organizational sustainability where HR professionals seem to have the highest impact.

**Recycling resources.** The results were interesting and, I think, highly applicable for those leading organizational development initiatives. The first area is what I will call recycling resources. This is the process, in our field, of developing organizational capacity through people. The three activities here should come as no surprise: attracting the right people; developing the

right people; and retaining the right people.

**Telic properties.** The second is what I call honoring the organization's "telic" properties. Ancient philosophers considered all things to have teleological properties, meaning they have a purpose. HR professionals here serve to align the entire organization toward a common purpose. The activities which comprise this function are: planning for the future; leading; motivating toward organizational purposes; communication; and aligning systems, policies, processes, and practices toward that common intention.

**Adaptable systems.** The third area is providing adaptable systems. Ecological systems survive to the extent they can adjust to changing external conditions. The same is truer today for organizations than ever before in this globally competitive world. New entrants, changing technology, and shifting political, military, and economic forces demand the ability to transform.

The activities HR professionals contribute here are ensuring adaptable processes, policies, and practices; managing change; letting go of past practices; assuring HR resources are accessible; and supporting generative interactions between people.

To take the metaphor further, I believe HR is a keystone species. In an ecological system a keystone species has a larger effect on the environment than its numbers would suggest. That's us, isn't it? If we are doing our jobs right, we are at the intersection of everything important going on in the organization, and the number of us typically doing it is very small relative to our impact.

### **The principles of organizational sustainability**

If you want your organization to survive and thrive over the long haul, pay attention. Healthy organizations of the future will exhibit the following traits, and training and development professionals play an integral role in every one of them.

**Be expert at learning to learn.** It won't be enough in the future to learn or to learn fast. Sustainable organizations will be highly skilled at learning how to learn when new situations confront them, often by transferring prior skills and applying them to new situations. That will be a key to their adaptability.

**Have vigorous feedback systems.** Successful organizations will have sensitive antenna out and will be very perceptive of both the changing external environment and the internal vitality of the organization. That's how they'll anticipate problems before their competitors and solve problems before they become, well, problems.

**Be generative.** Recycling human and other resources involves creating new opportunities and applications, seeing potential that others will miss, and continuing to build organizational capacity. It's a downward death spiral for those who allow a toxic physical or emotional environment to prevail.

**Diversify.** Variation protects against the possibility of being wiped out through a single vulnerability. Not only will diverse environments engender rich, multi-perspective thinking in organizations but they will be more likely to produce the wealth of competencies needed to survive against competitors in rapidly mutating industries.

I am not a biologist or ecologist, nor do I have any particular expertise in environmental science. But I do know this—if you want your organization to be around 20 years, seven years, or even next year, you'd better pin your hopes on sustainability principles like these.

We are in the middle of an organizational climate change of our own. Some of your resources are going to be drying up before you know it, predators are on the loose trying to snap up what will be left, and the competition can see you sweat. It's global warming of an organizational kind. Are you prepared to stand the heat?



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