Organizational Resilience: Uniting Leadership and Enhancing Sustainability

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Abstract

This article presents a model for developing leadership and resilience as a means to enhance sustainability. Resilience is defined herein as the ability to adapt effectively and efficiently to change; apply lessons learned from challenges, mistakes and/or successes to future situations; and ultimately, to grow and thrive. Nurturing resilience is a complex process comprised of increasing awareness, taking ownership, and engaging in education, as well as taking action. The latter necessitates a call to act, the ability to think critically, and the use of problem-solving skills. All aspects of the resilience model are thoroughly explained and suggestions for implementation are provided.

Introduction

Resilience has not received the attention it deserves in higher education, corporate sustainability, or corporate social responsibility literature. Yet, it is precisely resilience that provides the foundation for growing from disruptions and gaining market advantage. NASA space shuttle teams, the United States Navy SEALS, Wharton Business School students, and corporate executives are just some examples of leaders in their fields who seek the outdoor leadership (OL) industry to enhance their resilience, leadership, teamwork, and communication skills.[1] However, since backcountry expeditions are impractical for many organizations, this article aims to provide insights from OL to enhance resilience closer to home. Additionally, an argument is provided for incorporating a Sustainability Strategic Plan (SSP) as a means of creating a resilient organization led by a sustainability leadership team.

Prior to discussing an SSP or providing tactics for cultivating resilience, it may be helpful to gain insight into OL. Remote expeditions for students and corporate groups tend to be one week to one month in length. To live in close quarters with a group and to travel safely and efficiently in an outdoor environment for such time periods requires flexibility, humor, tolerance for adversity, effective communication, an accurate self-assessment, humility, conflict-resolution skills, critical and creative thinking skills, and a bevy of additional traits. Continuous rain for weeks, medical emergencies, curious grizzly bears, a plane with food re-rations that cannot land for days, strife within the group, the trials of getting lost, a burnt meal, and myriad other challenges strip people of façades they might be able to maintain during an eight-to-12-hour work day. People confront physical, emotional, and social stresses, catalyzed partially by the continual changes with little time to recharge; they also develop the means to cope, continue, and excel with support and guidance from instructors and peers, and from discovered inner strength. The outdoors provides a unique and rigorous learning environment that coaxes people out of their comfort zones. Caves, rivers, glaciers, and mountains offer countless opportunities to make mistakes, struggle, fail or succeed, learn from the experiences, and develop individual and group resilience. Research-ers James Neill and Katica Dias[2] found significantly greater gains in the resilience of 41 individuals who participated in an outdoor leadership course, when compared to a control group.

Ecologically, resilience is defined as the ability to absorb disruptions while maintaining basic function and structure.[3] Martin Seligman[4] more accurately describes the resilience needed in higher education, corporate sustainability, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) realms, highlighting the desired outcome of growth. Considering the quantity and variety of disruptions to organizations—such as budget cuts, natural disasters, disruptive technologies, emerging environmental policy, and persistent resource depletion—organizations need to not only absorb these disruptions, but they also need to grow from them. For the purposes of this article, resilience is defined as the ability to adapt effectively and efficiently to change; apply lessons learned from challenges, mistakes and/or successes to future situations; and ultimately, to grow and thrive. One opportunity for growth in many organizations is in sustainability.

The Need for Sustainability Strategic Plans

Organizations need to actively craft and implement SSPs to serve their consumers, investors, and employees effectively. In this article, sustainability is defined as a holistic approach to business that attends to economics, people, and the environment, so as to invest in the diverse components that will define future markets and capital. An SSP serves to guide both organizational vision and daily operations. However, even a well-designed strategy is merely one of many steps toward extracting the value from an integrated SSP. All segments of an organization must unite to both create and implement an SSP and both plan for and grow out of change, else the SSP will lose its place in the organization's agenda and thus fail. As such, growing resilience is critical to success.

For some organizations, the impetus to embrace sustainable practices is the result of current trends in governmental policy (such as climate change regulations and taxes), environmental challenges (such as water scarcity and resource depletion), economic challenges (such as rising fuel prices and budget cuts), social challenges (such as complying with fair trade guidelines or mitigating negative attention for unfair working conditions or child labor), and/or consumer-driven expectations. While some organizations' SSPs are self-driven, others are developed as a means to comply with a business partner. For example, Walmart's aggressive sustainability initiative entails working with suppliers to enhance their sustainability efforts.[5,6] No matter what the impetus, organizations need to act now to prepare for impending requisite changes to operations. Adopting a triple bottom line (TBL)[7,8] strategy allows organizations to reduce reliance on scarce resources and potentially increase profitability and a strong customer base, as well as develop resiliency through effective organizational change management.

Organizations that are equally committed to the TBL of their operations will:

1. minimize resource depletion and pollution, as well as compensate for what harm is done;
2. value diversity, empower and care for employees, customers, and others who might be affected by operations; and
3. have enough capital in reserve to deal with potential liabilities, as well as foster innovation and engage in philanthropy.

These three criteria entail constantly re-engaging with the SSP, which demands ongoing improvement and adaption to a growing host of needs. Organizations that do not attend to the TBL, or employ an SSP, will likely oscillate attention between the three areas as policy, economic pressures, social concerns, environmental strategy, business trends, and/or various leadership forces push against each other. This is not a winning long-term strategy.

Sustainability strategist Adam Werbach[5] believes that corporate leaders, as well as community and political leaders, must address the long-term consequences of their actions (which can be part of an SSP). Organizations that are proactive in their approach will have fewer liabilities and more opportunities than those that are negligent during the planning phase. While some liabilities can be foreseen during the planning phase (e.g., mining tailings), other liabilities may remain elusive for some time and then appear later with severe ramifications. For example, in 2008 it was widely revealed that Bisphenol A (BPA), invented in 1891 and used in hard plastics, may have negative effects on human development. In this case, BPA was thought to be harmless for nearly 120 years. Public disclosure of possible health risks from BPA in a number of government reports sent many corporations scrambling to allay the public concerns. Presumably, resilient companies that reacted efficiently and thoughtfully fared better than those that resisted change.

An organization that is trusted by the public is more sustainable, competitive, marketable, and likely to survive in a dynamic and voracious market than one that is not. In fact, the public is calling for more responsible corporate operations. A University of Wisconsin survey[9] of 1,006 participants revealed that 82 percent of adults in the United States think business leaders need to learn more about the environment. Organizations that are not addressing sustainability issues, such as resource depletion and fair working conditions, may well be considered lacking in vision and long-term viability. Further, organizations that are slow to act may not only feel the brunt of new government regulations and increasing materials and transportation costs, but they also may well lose stakeholders' confidence in the organization's ability to adequately prepare for future changes. SSPs can aid organizations in both setting and attaining sustainability goals. Uniting the sustainability leadership team (SLT) and seeing it both value and model resilience and an SSP is crucial. Whether in the OL industry, higher education, or in corporations, garnering participant/employee engagement hinges on leaders' buy-in and modeling.

Uniting Leadership

A well-positioned SSP is built on a strong foundation of an SLT and a resilient workforce. Figure 1 depicts a three-tiered, pervasive organizational change strategy that embraces sustainability at all levels.

Fig. 1. Three-tiered organizational change strategy

The foundation of this model entails establishing a united and effective SLT, comprised of people from throughout the organization, which strives every day to adapt and embrace an organizational vision with sustainability at its heart. In some cases, middle management in corporations or students in higher education drive sustainability. However, an SSP will only succeed if executive leadership buys in, and preferably drives, the change process, thus supplying authority, granting power to the change agents within the organization, and supporting the expenditure of resources for SSP implementation. Once the SLT is established, or even while it is uniting, it is crucial to cultivate a resilient workforce that can anticipate, flow with, and learn from proactive changes and unanticipated challenges.

Resilience

Engagement and resilience characterize successful organizations. Change, both proactive and unanticipated, is inevitable; yet few organizations have the ability to rebound, and, more importantly, grow

from it. According to 2006 Accenture study, of 151 U.S. companies with more than $1 billion in revenue, 73 percent experienced a supply-chain disruption within five years.[10] Whether facing supply-chain disruptions, natural disasters, changes in organizational structure, mistakes, or other challenges, resilience facilitates personal and organizational success. Interestingly, in a study of over 630 executives, Accenture (2009) also found that 73 percent of U.S. and 30 percent of U.K. respondents reported that their organizations failed to learn from their mistakes; they failed to be resilient.[11]

Creating a resilient organization, therefore, calls for nurturing resilient individuals who are encouraged, and are provided the professional development and resources to react and adjust across departments, regions, countries, and so on. One means of doing this is having a constant and respectful feedback loop. In OL, it is common to debrief each day, so as to extract lessons from decision making, mistakes, successes, group dynamics, etc. Also, it is common practice for all group members to provide both positive and constructive feedback to others. This is akin to a 360-degree assessment. However, in OL, this process is an ongoing, mentoring relationship, unlike in higher education and corporations where feedback tends to occur on an annual cycle. Another important step is making sure there are key people in the right positions.

Author Jim Collins[12] found that effective CEOs are humble and tenacious. They get "the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats" (p. 13). The results of our inquiry with CEOs and sustainability directors (SD) suggest that there are three approaches that can be taken when implementing an SSP:

1. Mandate that all who do not support the SSP find employment elsewhere.
2. Hire same-minded people.
3. Generate buy-in and create a sense of ownership from the existing workforce.

All three approaches can work. Arguably, the first two approaches do not make a constructive foundation for fostering resilience: bolstering one's own resilience necessitates optimism[4] and organizational resilience necessitates diverse thinking. That being said, all three approaches have proven successful in implementing an SSP. Choosing the best course of action will depend on the organizational culture and the tact of the

CEO. When Patrick O'Donnell became the CEO of Aspen Ski Corporation, which consistently earns A ratings from the Ski Area Citizens' Coalition, he took an aggressive approach.[13] While supporting those who embraced his new environmental initiatives, he asked that any employees not adopting his new direction should hand in their resignations. Many organizations that are born green, such as Seventh Generation, Whole Foods, Prescott College, and Bainbridge Graduate Institute, tend to attract people whose values align with the organizations' existing practices, and at the very least, are open to learning. Companies that are not born green may choose to hire people who have a passion for (or, at the very least, an interest in) sustainability. No matter what the tactic, uniting around an SSP can cultivate buy-in and resilience.

Ultimately, a shift in organizational vision and daily operations associated with an SSP entails asking people, and a culture, to change. Author Malcolm Gladwell's three change criteria[14] are important to heed as the leadership team provides awareness, ownership, and educational and action opportunities for stakeholders. 1.) New information must come from trusted sources (e.g., consultants, the chief sustainability officer, the executive team, a friend, colleague, news source). 2.) The prospective change result of action and/or thoughts must be within one's moral code. 3.) The message must be reinforced (hence, an SLT). Gladwell's assertions suggest that change agents must listen so as to best understand how to reach people, rather than espousing answers and directions. Upon assessing what is heard, the SLT can offer opportunities for raising awareness, taking ownership, and furthering education, as well as taking action. The content, of course, will depend on what speaks to the workforce and culture of the organization. As depicted in Figure 2, cultivating resilience is a dynamic and complex process that starts with awareness.

Awareness

Awareness is the first stage in the process of cultivating resilience. Recognizing that business as usual no longer works is a crucial step in realizing the need for change. Ball Corporation hired a consultant and after senior executives were given a presentation on The Triple Bottom Line,[8] the concept of the TBL approach to business was adopted.[15] Sandy Wiggins,[16] chairman at e3Bank and director at Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, as well as past chair of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), described an *aha* moment that catalyzed his awareness. Wiggins had been in the building and development field for 15 years when the architect of a project he was working on shared an article with him over lunch. He said they began "to see the environmental legacy associated with the raw material extraction, transportation, and manufacturing of the many products that go into buildings. We talked about this idea as we ate and decided…that we would try to do something about it on our project. … At one point during this process, I woke up in the middle of the night and realized that every one of the countless decisions I was making, large and small, had a direct bearing on the health of the planetary systems that support life."

No matter what the impetus, once awareness is sparked, education can be deepened and ownership taken; then, opportunities for sustainable actions abound.

Ownership and Education

People are hungry for sustainability education. Among 12,174 people (75 percent high school students and 25 percent parents) surveyed for the 2010 Princeton Review College Hopes & Worries Survey,[17] 64 percent of respondents reported that a college's commitment to environmental issues would influence their college-choice
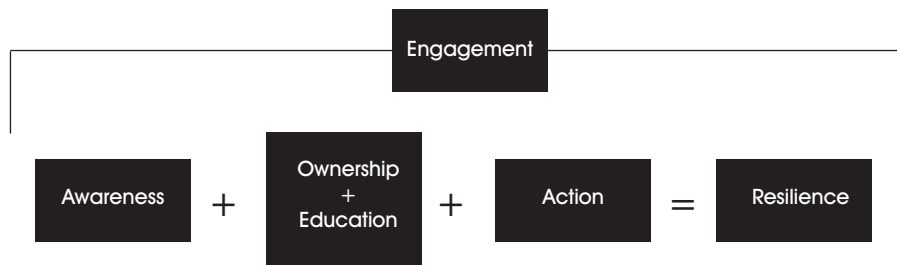
Fig. 2. Cultivating Resilience

Engagement

Awareness + Ownership + Education + Action = Resilience

decision. These statistics pertain to the marketplace, for these are current and future consumers and future employees and investors. As such, these survey findings suggest that every organization—be it educational or corporate—ought to consider sustainability; one means of doing this is via professional development.

There are myriad approaches to professional development that provide opportunities for taking ownership and deepening education. A winning sustainability ownership and education strategy (which entails leadership, buy-in, and resilience at its core) entails a mix of approaches, such as:

- A memo informing employees of the upcoming initiative, its mission, the role the individuals are asked to take, and a brief introduction to the SLT.

- A short-term in-service wherein the CEO/president and/or SLT share justifications for embracing sustainability. Testimonials from people at other organizations, case studies, and discussions allow for additional means of engagement.

- An off-site, short-term retreat in which employees and the SLT can tackle sustainability-oriented action by learning/problem-solving activities in a less formal environment. The likelihood of negative consequences is low (i.e., no economic risk) and opportunities for bonding, enhancing communication, and collaboration are frequent. Participants are allowed to fail in a safe environment, regroup, and try another approach. These types of dry runs are crucial in building resilience.

- An on-site, long-term, interdepartment problem-solving challenge might entail gathering packaging designers, manufacturers, and marketers; packagers and loaders of goods; recipients, consumers, custodians, and any other key people; and charging them with decreasing packaging and, hence, waste by 15 percent. The group would take action by solving a practical problem while learning to be a united and resilient team via regular reviews of process and progress. The power of working across divisions, rather than in silos, would also be revealed.

The framework of building resilience is important, and so are the details of engaging people, for not all people learn the same way.

Action

The final step of resilience is taking action, which requires a call-to-action, problem-solving skills, and the ability to think critically—the actions need to align with the sustainability vision and strategic plan. A tactic that can help individuals gain awareness into their own actions and impacts, while taking action, is to challenge them to create and implement a personal sustainability plan.[5] Organizations can make a bigger investment in employees taking action. For example, at Patagonia, employees can apply for a sabbatical to do service. Whether on a micro or macro level, taking action within or outside the corporate walls becomes a stepping-stone for taking bigger actions, which can aid the successful implementation of an SSP. Further, empowering people to be proactive contributes to a resilient culture.

Sustainability Strategic Plan

Creating an SSP that aligns with the organizational mission—one that is neither tangential nor an add-on—and a workforce that is constantly striving to achieve it, is crucial to effectively and efficiently fostering a sustainable organization. Richard Manning, from the manufacturing industry viewpoint,[18] asserts that organizations need to define a sustainability vision that includes the opinions and ideas of the entire organization. An SSP positioned for success is an ongoing, long-term endeavor, as society, organizations, and personnel are ever-changing, which necessitates the SLT, organization, and SSP to also change. For example, the organization must consider liabilities (e.g., mining tailings), current concerns, and policies (e.g., climate change, pollution, fair trade), and future issues (e.g., water availability, waste, resource depletion, carbon footprint). An organization must create an SSP with an awareness of the need for flexibility and patience.

While an SSP will have benchmarks, it ought not only serve as merely a checklist, but as a dynamic document and process that entails planning, acting, reflecting, and refining (PARR). When the SSP is challenged, whether by people, politics, the marketplace, natural disasters, or other influences, using the PARR model can guide organizations to start planning all over, or simply pause to reflect and refine. Further, if the SLT works to cultivate organizational

resilience and a united workforce that has strong communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills, the organization will be well poised to respond to both anticipated and unanticipated changes.

Conclusion

Whether for altruistic reasons, student recruitment, dwindling finite resources, or Hewitt and Associates' findings that employee engagement is correlated strongly with socially and environmentally responsible organizations,[19] the pursuit of sustainability is paramount. However, because in the corporate world and in higher education, sustainability is a young endeavor, best practices stemming from research are lacking. As such, two suggestions for pressing research include:

- determining the most efficient and effective means of creating a culture of sustainability in organizations that are not born green

- longitudinal studies that track employees' engagement and/or resilience while organizations build a sustainable culture

For large organizations to adapt, departments and individuals must work toward a resilient culture. Keeping a workforce engaged and motivated will contribute to successfully implementing an SSP.

Author Disclosure Statement

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