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FEBRUARY 2011



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CREATING A VIBRANT WORKPLACE

Learn the tools for sustainable success

BY GRAHAM LOWE



“A sustainable organization succeeds by renewing and replenishing its human and social capital.”

Most people think about sustainability in terms of the natural environment. Yet long-term corporate success also depends on developing rather than depleting the organization's resources. Ultimately, a sustainable organization succeeds by renewing and replenishing its human and social capital—just as the planet has to renew and replenish its natural resources.

HR plays a key role in the actions required to make success sustainable. As a start, HR professionals can assess their organization for its human sustainability. If the goal is a resilient, agile and thriving workforce in 10 years, then HR must identify the necessary people practices and work designs.

HR also can bring to the executive table a compelling vision of how healthy people practices and community relationships will enable the organization to thrive in the future. And when it comes to implementing organizational sustainability, HR can help managers to follow five principles:

1. Take a long-term and holistic view of success
2. Link HR and CSR
3. Strengthen the culture
4. Tap into the employee experience
5. Cultivate future workforce capabilities

LONG-TERM, HOLISTIC VIEW

Future success depends on striking a fine balance between people practices, culture, and organizational systems and structures. To achieve this balance, managers must take a long-term, integrative and holistic approach in thinking about the company's people. HR

can encourage this thinking by showing how the organization's future capabilities depend on the well-being of its employees. In other words, employees are optimally healthy, safe, resilient, fulfilled and engaged at work.

A long-term view of human assets is also reflected in how the organization goes about cultivating people capabilities for the future. In today's uncertain economy, an organization's future depends more than ever on its capabilities to adapt, learn, lead, innovate and be resilient. These are organizational attributes that are greater than the sum of individual employees' training and development activities, and, therefore, can't be instantly created.

LINK HR AND CSR

The gap between rhetoric and practice regarding social responsibility must be closed. According to a global survey of CEOs conducted by management consulting firm, McKinsey & Company, most believe their companies should embed responsible approaches to environmental, social and governance issues into their strategy and operations. The reality is few companies actually do this. One step toward closing the rhetoric-practice gap is to unite HR and CSR.

Sustainable organizations have figured out ways to integrate CSR with their people practices. Critics are right when they assert that CSR without HR is PR. For example, senior executives make time in their schedules to be on the local United Way board or other prominent community charities. The follow through for HR is to let front-line employees know they also can get involved in

fundraising campaigns or other volunteer activities. The company's emphasis on community service should then be reflected in adjustable workloads and flexible work arrangements that enable employees to take time to volunteer.

Also needed is a unified approach to HR and CSR strategies. This can be seen at Nexen, a North American-based independent energy company with global operations. Nexen has tightened the links between its health, safety, environmental and social responsibility policies and practices. Employee safety and health are not a separate set of goals and practices, but are embedded in the company culture by valuing trust, respect and co-operation—an approach that is understood by managers to contribute directly to business results.

STRENGTHEN THE CULTURE

Strengthening the HR-CSR link requires a transparent, values-based corporate philosophy that is applied rigorously by employees in all their working relationships, inside and outside the organization. At the heart of sustainable success is the integrity with which board members, managers and employees apply the organization's core values in all decisions and actions. Consistency in this regard expands the possibilities for positively shaping the future of your organization.

Due to CSR's external focus, its internal supports often get overlooked. Yet a company's CSR practices depend on an enabling culture, supported by committed leadership. Equally necessary is how employees themselves contribute to and

perceive these CSR practices. When companies showcase their carbon-neutral footprint or close monitoring of human rights among Third-World contractors, we also need to understand the role employees played in these accomplishments. And when an organization receives an outstanding employer award, we need to determine if this squares with its treatment of external stakeholders. This happens naturally in a culture that values the long-term goals of people, community and environment.

Consider, for example, Vancity, a credit union on Canada's west coast that has been widely recognized for combining CSR and HR within an ethical business framework. Vancity has three values: integrity, innovation and responsibility. It defines the latter as, "We are accountable to our members, employees, colleagues and communities for the results of our decisions and actions." Everyone in Vancity's world—employees, customers, suppliers and communities—is a partner in shaping its future. The employee value proposition is also the community value proposition.

TAP INTO THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Providing an employee perspective on CSR makes sense, given that workers increasingly want green and responsible employers. An online poll of young Canadian workers by Monster.ca discovered that most would consider leaving their current job for a more environmentally friendly employer. The kinds of companies that will be attractive are moving quickly to

embed human and environmental criteria into how they conduct business and every step in the product or service chain.

An employee-centred view of environmental practices also pays off. Design consultant Valerie Casey at the California-based

“HR professionals can assess their organization for its human sustainability.”

design house IDEO has written a Designers Accord. Companies like Johnson & Johnson, Adobe Systems and others who sign on are making a public commitment to sustainable design and to tracking their carbon footprint. While recruitment, retention and talent development goals may not be central to the "Designers Accord," it surely will contribute to these companies' human-resources goals.

CULTIVATE FUTURE CAPABILITIES

Organizations that thrive constantly regenerate their resources. Healthy work environments enable this regeneration.

Just as we view the challenges facing the natural environment, we also need to think of organizations as fragile ecosystems. An organization is doomed if it burns out employees, exhausts credit lines, alienates customers, acts unethically or is irresponsible toward the environment.

The dynamics of a healthy work environment generate benefits for the communities in which the organization operates. Internal and external renewal strategies are merged. The long-range workforce plans, inclusive workplace and flexible employment practices described

here should be viewed as enablers of business strategies that embrace the ethics of environmental and social responsibility.

There's now talk of a "sustainability advantage" flowing from environmental policies and practices that contribute to human resource goals. As such, a company's brand and reputation is becoming an integral part of future workforce planning.

In this way, any sustainability advantage could just as accurately be called a healthy organization advantage, because it rests on workplace, cultural and leadership foundations.

BEYOND THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

It's time to expand the triple bottom-line view of "people, planet, profits" by including how organizations can renew their human systems. Most large corporations now publish CSR reports to demonstrate accountability and transparency in the eyes of stakeholders. Increasingly critical to a company's reputation in this regard are its internal people practices.

A sustainable organization looks at its success in terms of what's optimal for all stakeholders. Most of all, organizations that nurture the capabilities of their workforce for the long term and revitalize their communities also will be better positioned to forge enduring relationships with the most important ingredient of success—customers. **HR**

Graham Lowe, PhD., is president of The Graham Lowe Group Inc., a workplace consulting firm. For more on creating a sustainable culture, read his new book Creating Healthy Organizations: How Vibrant Workplaces Inspire Employees to Achieve Sustainable Success.