Employee Engagement with Sustainable Business: How to Change the World Whilst Keeping Your Day Job

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**Theme of the Book**

The book examines the role of employees in creating sustainable organisations. It identifies how leading companies are strategically engaging employees in sustainability, by both nurturing certain employee types and also by managing their corporate culture strategically so that sustainable success is enabled. Examples from around the world are shared – such as from M&S, Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Arup, Qatar Airways, Olam, SABMiller, and UPS – and advice is given to both companies and employees.

This book provides insight, examples and advice on the different types of employees who are, and can, contribute to a sustainable world via the organisation they work for: what they are doing from within the organization to contribute to societal, economic and environmental sustainability.
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Key Learning Points

- Employees can be the missing link in many company sustainability strategies, since individual employee actions can make a huge difference.

- For change to become permanent it is necessary for a mass of committed, innovative people to make it their own.

- Employees who make a difference can be categorised as the unsung heroes, sustainability specialists, social intrapreneurs, champions, and godparents.

- There is a critical role for ‘social intrapreneurs’ and leaders within organisations.

- Real life examples assist recognition of good practice and illustrate the latest research.
1. Introduction

Sustainability is, and continues to grow as, a key issue for organizations: in the boardroom; with investors, customers and regulators; and from employees whose demands on organizations include improving their social and environmental performance in return for loyalty and commitment. However, as well as employees being a driver for organizations to embrace corporate sustainability, employees are also one of the most critical assets in enabling an organisation to understand and be able to deliver to its economic, social and environmental responsibilities.

Research shows that employees of all types are vital in the pursuit of sustainability, however, to date there is no one source that shows all of these identified types of employees and how they are involved in the sustainability process. This book fills that gap with interviews and case studies for each type of employee, as well as up-to-date research and analysis of the critical role of ‘social intrapreneurs’ and leaders within organisations. The book uses real life examples along with the latest research in an informative and accessible style. Management theory is used throughout – such as motivation, leadership skills and organisational behaviour – but this is discussed through examples, rather than in a theoretical manner.

There is no doubt about the great global challenges we face in the decades to come; even climate change deniers admit that the supply of oil, water and natural resources is dwindling fast. The few rich have gotten richer whilst the many poor have gotten poorer; many areas where natural resources do exist are plagued by wars, conflict and ever-aggressive competition for those scarce resources. Still too many people live in extreme poverty and others work in environments of prevalent racism, sexism and intergenerational inequality.¹

But that is not the whole story - here’s the great secret, the great hope: if together we take simple actions, we can have immense effect. This does not have to be a story of sadness, but one of hope, of courage and of action. Many may feel ‘climate-change fatigue’ or ‘environmental melancholia’², or feel powerless to
make a difference ... But there are still hundreds of thousands of people around
the world getting involved to create a better future – taking control of their world,
their actions, and making a difference. Some of them are profiled in this book:
Priya, who works for Microsoft in the US, calls it a ‘grassroots movement’.
Sumanta, who works in Indonesia for Olam, says it’s simply the right way to think
and act. Charlotte, working for Centrica in the UK, calls it her purpose, her way to
help.

‘Sustainability’ as a term has now thankfully entered the lexicon of popular
culture; it is recognised and often used not just by specialists, politicians or
business but in civil society as well. Schools around the world run poetry
competitions themed on sustainability; documentary and feature films have been
produced on the subject of sustainability. There are some wonderful examples of
public figures and popular movements advocating sustainability who have done
much to further understanding of why creating a sustainable world is so
important. Well known names include US politician Al Gore’s education
programme and documentary ‘An Inconvenient Truth’; UK actor Pete
Postlethwaite campaigning for the environment and starring in ‘The Age of
Stupid’; business woman Dame Anita Rodderick setting up The Body Shop; and
entrepreneur Ray Anderson and his advocacy for industrial ecology and
sustainability. They all have advanced the understanding of sustainability issues,
helping to make ‘sustainability’ accepted and legitimate within our society.

And so as the concept of ‘sustainability’ has become more of a social norm, more
and more individuals around the world are accepting responsibility for their actions
and are taking on extra tasks at home and in their place of work. Many employees
manipulate the corporate system, change it or create new systems that enable
positive action. Some of these individuals are profiled in this book and work in
organisations that on the whole value employees and engage them in
sustainability. The pay-back for these organisations is the emergence of engaged,
responsible employees that create value for the organisation on multiple levels.
New business opportunities, innovation, cost saving, loyalty and new products and
services are some of the organisational benefits realised. The benefit for the
individual however is in-imitable: a job that aligns with their values and concerns,
adds meaning to their life, and becomes a job where they can take control of the impact they have on the world and truly make a unique difference.

The book profiles a selection of best practice examples of individual employees around the world taking action to create societal or environmental good: the unsung heroes, the specialists, the social intrapreneurs, the champions, and the godparents. These types are somewhat interchangeable, but are also unique in their specific role, impact and characteristics. Working in organisations that understand and take sustainability seriously, these employees are empowered into action because of their personal values and motivations, because of specific organisational enablers, and because of wider societal change afoot. These employees work in a manner true to their personal values and bring individuality into a corporate system with great success; for themselves and for the corporations they work for.

2. Unsung Heroes

Often called the ‘corporate system’, organisations seem to develop a unique way of getting things done that almost develops a life of its own. People work within that system, sometimes developing it, encouraging it or trying to buck it. This ‘way of getting things done’ is in fact the organisational culture, and when strategically managed it can be positive for both organisational and individual success. However, not many organisations approach the system – the culture – as a strategic asset and as a consequence negative cultures and bad consequences can arise. ‘Culture’ is especially relevant for sustainability because being responsible – at both an individual and organisational level – is personal, complex and context specific. However, in a few leading organisations there are individuals who recognise the importance of an engaged and positive culture and work strategically to develop and maintain this system. Once such company is a leading sustainable retailer in the UK called Marks & Spencer (M&S); a small team of individuals work within M&S to ensure the culture is positive and provides the foundations for success to flourish. These are the Unsung Heroes, quietly getting on with their jobs and passionate about creating a culture that enables and
engages employees and contributes to the success M&S has achieved as a leading sustainable business.

### 3. Corporate Sustainability Specialists

An emerging profession, corporate Sustainability Specialists are employees whose job is to focus exclusively on helping their organisation become more sustainable. They are experts on a variety of related topics, and good generalists with solid business acumen. They could be part of a specific sustainability department, or an individual director working with Champions. As employees, Specialists are unique because they sit within the organisation and work to change the status quo, but also work very closely with external stakeholders as critical friends. The role is demanding – not only because it is still defining itself as a new profession and because we still do not have whole-scale acceptance that sustainability is relevant to business – but also because of the unique skill set, knowledge, and personal characteristics Specialists need to be good at their job. Profiled are six experienced Specialists whose personal motivation, characteristics and effectiveness are helping to professionalise the specialism.

### 4. Social Intrapreneurs

Social Intrapreneurs are employees within an organisation who takes direct action for innovation(s) which address social or environmental challenges profitably. Social Intrapreneurs are a new type of employee that has emerged notably over the last decade. They take direct action by creating innovations that meet both social/environmental and corporate needs. They are determined, have a unique perspective of the role of business in society, and also have a unique skill set – including entrepreneurial skills. Unlike social entrepreneurs working outside a for-profit business, Social Intrapreneurs believe that business can be a force for good whilst creating commercial value, and so work within organisations to create positive social change.
5. The Sustainability Champion

Champions are employees who support a cause or ideology and express this by taking on extra tasks and activities in their workplace. Their first profession is not sustainability, but they have a personal interest in an issue that is relevant to corporate sustainability, such as the environment, ethical trade, or social cohesion. Champions support the efforts being made to create a sustainable organisation, helping to implement change within their own sphere of influence and in some instances initiating change across the organisation. They work with Sustainability Specialists and are effective because they are embedded within the organisation. They also have unique motivations and skills that enable them to become Champions. Profiled are a range of Champions from the very experienced to the determined new; Champions are not generation or age defined, but they do share a common mindset and skills.

6. The Sustainability Godparent

The idea of mentors is well known in business; [usually] middle or senior management employees who pass on support, guidance and advice to more junior members of staff. However, there is a type of employee who goes beyond mentoring; they help and advise the protégé to navigate the organisation as a political entity, and beyond this they take specific actions and interventions to enable their protégés in their work. Sustainability Godparents can be motivated by the desire to enable others, help junior members of staff develop, or because they have a personal passion for sustainable business. Godparents are effective because they have legitimacy, contacts, influence and power. They do not need to be active change-makers themselves; but they help others to be effective through influencing, advising and enabling.

However – it is not enough that these extraordinary change-makers alone take action. Hope now lies not just with them, but with you as well. We can’t outsource sustainability. In 2012 over 3 billion people around the world were employed – whether in for-profit, charity, private, social enterprises or public sector...
organisations.\textsuperscript{v} Therefore, because it is us working in these businesses, we have significant power; we can make significant change. And businesses around the world understand this and are making commitments and advancing the knowledge and expertise of how to live sustainably.\textsuperscript{vi}

Consider the commitments made by individual global citizens prior to the Rio 2012 Climate Change Summit: over 1 billion commitments were made to the Earth Day Network campaign ‘A billion acts of green’.\textsuperscript{vii} If you are one of the 3 billion employed then it is likely that you, a family member, your neighbour, or friend or colleague made a commitment to the campaign. As an employee you can get involved; you need to get involved\textsuperscript{viii}.

The book profiles these five new types of employees who are emerging and taking action to create a more sustainable world. These are their stories, their actions. This is how they are changing the world without losing their day job. You may recognise yourself or friends and colleagues from their stories. These people are from all walks of life taking control and doing extra-ordinary things. But they are not actors, campaigners or politicians – they are your colleague sitting opposite you. They are the engineer building a bridge, the person supplying the coffee you drink. They are working from within organisations to make a difference. These are their stories. It could be yours.

\textbf{“Sustainabil\textit{ity is a grass-roots movement that can make a difference; it’s about taking care of each other ... it’s a feeling that I could make a change. And we need to build a community of those interested ... in being someone who wants to make the world better.” (Priya, Microsoft \textit{– Sustainability Champion})\textsuperscript{ix}”}
About the author

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1 For a future visioning in film see ‘The Age of Stupid’.
2 For more on climate-change fatigue, blame-shifting etc read Sally Weintrobe (2013). Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives. Routledge: UK.
3 www.ecotube.com; www.youtube.com
4 Formal and informal process and procedures that dictate or guide how things get done in the organisation.
6 For example, prior to the 2012 Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development a group of over 1,000 businesses leaders from very large global multinationals together made significant voluntary corporate commitments to be more sustainable.
8 http://act.earthday.org/. Accessed September 2012. With a global population in 2012 over 7 billion (including those not of working age, unemployed, unable to work etc), in fact all can get involved, employed or not.
9 Please see Chapter on The Sustainability Champions.