

Sustainable Practice In Universities - Leading And Championing Change

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ABSTRACT

In educating the next generation of professionals, universities have come to realise that they cannot ignore the global shift towards sustainable practice. From the perspectives of good business practice, moral obligation and professional relevance, universities have been compelled to move to more sophisticated practice in the interconnected spheres of economic, environmental and social activity. Evidence indicates that progress has been made, but long-term organisation-wide transformative change is still many years away.

Two factors are often cited as reasons why sustainability programs are not as successful as they could be in universities - lack of leadership and failure to manage change. However, this paper proposes that it is the integration of these two factors that is the critical factor overall – that leadership itself is an issue in change management; and that leading the management of change is crucial to successful implementation of sustainable practice.

This paper considers these issues within the context of preliminary analysis conducted upon interview data gathered from universities located in Sydney, Australia. This analysis demonstrates that leading sustainable practice is characterised by executive-level support for appropriate change management practices in order to achieve long-term organisation-wide transformative change.

Keywords: sustainable, sustainability, universities, leadership, change

INTRODUCTION

Reorienting an organisation toward a more sustainable basis of operation is a challenging task with significant change management implications for planning, business operations, and employees. Sustainability is not a ‘blanket option’ – it must be carefully honed to the specific circumstances of individual organisations operating within distinct industries (Pratt & Pratt, 2010).

Mobilising universities to adopt more sustainable practices across all areas of their core business is even more of a challenge. Sustainable practice in universities is not limited to operational matters – it must also include research, teaching, community engagement, philanthropy, and outreach, advocacy and community services. The task is further complicated by growing evidence that the commercial world increasingly regards sustainable practice as key to becoming a high-performance organisation (for example, Pratt & Pratt, 2010).

Many factors have been cited as responsible for the failure of universities to become more sustainable organisations - lack of leadership and failure to manage change are prominent among these. Even when attempts are made to address these particular problems, universities can often remain generally unsuccessful in terms of lasting change (for example, Carpenter & Meehan, 2002; Starik, Schaeffer, Berman & Hazelwood, 2002; Velazquez, Munguia & Sanchez, 2005; Christensen, Herreborg Jørgenson & Lehmann, 2008; McIntosh, Gaalswyk, Keniry & Eagan, 2008).

It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that universities have been accused of ‘greenwash’ in relation to the extent and success of their sustainability programs, given that universities as institutions of learning, teaching, research, engagement, outreach and advocacy have a number of key – and usually self-identified - responsibilities in relation to the theory and practice of sustainability. One of the most important of these is that of preparing future business and community leaders for the ‘sustainability aware’ marketplace. Another key responsibility is setting the sustainability example for all organisations. These two responsibilities are foundations of significant initiatives relating directly to the global higher education sector, including the *Talloires Declaration*¹ (the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future) (signed in 1990), and (particularly pertinent), the *Principles for Responsible Management Education* (the United Nations Global Compact [signed in 2007]).

This paper aims to explore an issue that has not yet been widely considered. That is, leadership itself is an issue in change management; and that leading the management of change is crucial to successful implementation of sustainable practice. Further, that it is the leadership-change management disconnect in universities which is the more crucial factor that is negatively impacting sustainability initiatives, rather than the individual effects of lack of leadership and failure to manage change alone. Examples of organisations that successfully integrate leadership and change management, and which also exhibit leading sustainable practice, are presented as examples that universities may wish to consider in relation to changes that could be made to their own organisational practices and, more specifically, sustainability programs.

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE AND HIGH-PERFORMANCE ORGANISATIONS

There is strong evidence linking sustainable practice and financial performance. While legislative and regulatory compliance are also considered to be strong motivators for change (for example, Post & Altman, 1994; Stead & Stead, 1994; Benn, Dunphy & Griffiths, 2006), Judge and Elenkov (2005), and Pratt and Pratt (2010) note several research and case studies demonstrating that the more that firms integrated sustainability concerns into their strategic planning process, the better the firms’ financial performance as well as environmental performance. Further, the more advanced a firm’s ‘environmental technology portfolio’ [such as technologies designed to reduce emissions and waste discharge], the better the firm’s financial and environmental performance (Post & Altman, 1994; Judge & Elenkov, 2005; Nidumolu, Prahalad & Rangaswami, 2009; Pratt & Pratt, 2010).

Organisations can also leverage sound sustainable practice to differentiate themselves in competitive markets, along with marketing and advertising strategies. Full integration of sustainable practice into an organisation’s value chain results in greater differentiation, particularly in areas such as design, technology, packaging, through dealer and supplier networks, customer service models, human resource management (environmental training and awareness programs for staff), the establishment of environmental databases and accounting, cleaner production and reduced waste (Avery, 2005; Pratt & Pratt, 2010).

Therefore, organisations that can demonstrate achievement of sustainability objectives may be more likely to realise healthier business returns, cleaner/more efficient operations, reduced costs, higher repeat/new business,

¹ The *Talloires Declaration*, so-called because it was signed in 1990 in Talloires, France, is a 10-point action plan created by the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future. The Declaration states that ‘universities have a major role in... education, research, policy formation and information exchange necessary’, in relation to sustainability. As of February 2009, the Declaration has been signed by more than 350 university presidents and chancellors at institutions in over 40 countries. The 10 action points are:

1. Increase awareness of environmentally sustainable development;
2. Create an institutional culture of sustainability;
3. Educate for environmentally responsible citizenship;
4. Foster environmental literacy for all;
5. Practice institutional ecology;
6. Involve all stakeholders;
7. Collaborate for interdisciplinary approaches;
8. Enhance capacity of primary and secondary schools;
9. Broaden service and outreach nationally and internationally;
10. Maintain the movement.

increased levels of customer loyalty, improved community relationships, and lower employee turnover (Benn, Dunphy & Griffiths, 2006; Pratt & Pratt, 2010).

However, what particularly characterises the high-performance, sustainable organisation is a high level of integration between leadership and change management practices and behaviour; and a clear recognition that leading the management of change is critical to the achievement of goals and objectives (for example, Avery, 2004; Avery, 2005; Pratt & Pratt, 2010). Examples include organisations such as Putumayo (world music supplier), Dilmah Tea (single-origin sustainable tea production), Patagonia (outdoor clothing), Allianz (global finance), BMW (vehicle manufacturing), and Novartis (pharmaceuticals) (Avery, 2004; Avery, 2005; Pratt & Pratt, 2010). These organisations are regarded as leaders in sustainable practice, not least because they leverage sustainable leadership behaviour and a considered approach to change management to achieve long-term organisation-wide transformative change. By leveraging such capability, they are also leaders in their respective industries in terms of being highly profitable, socially responsible, environmentally proactive, and have remained viable over the long-term.

The next section discusses the impact on organisations when there is a disconnection between leadership and change management practices and behaviour; and the leadership models that are more likely to either promote or prevent this disconnect.

THE LEADERSHIP-CHANGE MANAGEMENT DISCONNECT

Leadership and change management (and implicit within this relationship, organisational culture) are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. McGregor (1960), Senge (1990), Bass and Avolio (1993), Kotter (1996), Parnell and Hatem (1999), Kell and Carrott (2005) and Mankins and Steele (2005) all note the futility of attempting to transform organisations if change management, leadership and culture are not linked.

The literature is replete with examples of what happens when these links are broken. Leaders become isolated and narcissistic, and organisational culture tends to become highly destructive. Companies where these types of problems develop tend to accumulate and institutionalise dysfunctions, resistance to change is high and cynicism is widespread (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1986; Kotter, 1996; Nielson, Pasternack & Van Nuys, 2005). Such organisations, termed 'passive-aggressive' by Nielson, Pasternack and Van Nuys (2005), tend to develop problems as the company grows through a series of well-intended but badly implemented organisational changes layered one upon another, usually exacerbated by unclear scope of authority, misleading goals and agreement without cooperation (Kotter, 1996; Nielson, Pasternack & Van Nuys, 2005). Inefficiency, confusion, anger and uncertainty set in; people are unable to perceive and identify serious threats; and often, the end result is irreversible damage (usually financial).

Research indicates that it is the more traditional, isolationist styles of leadership that tend to be associated with dysfunctional change management practices. Traditionalist leadership constructs tend to be distinctly North American, with a strong bias towards the Western, Anglo-Saxon, white male-dominated and oriented organisation (for example, Stogdill, 1974, House & Aditya, 1997; Weymes, 2001). Such constructs also tend to approach leaders as being outside, above, remote from or in some other way detached from the organisation, situation, people and/or environment they are supposed to be leading. These individuals lead alone, from in front, and are removed from the organisation itself. This is a hierarchical conceptualisation of leadership that does not provide room for those with leadership capabilities and/or responsibilities that do not occupy the 'top job'. Unfortunately it is also the conceptualisation of leadership that tends to prevail in universities in Australia (for example, Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008).

Avery (2005) notes that this view of top-down leadership, with its emphasis on centralised power and hierarchical structures, may not even be sustainable. The careers of such leaders in the modern world tend to be short and well-paid, often with relatively young incumbents whose tenure is dependent upon continued exceptional performance (Avery, 2005). Such a view of leadership perpetuates the view that the 'people at the top' are in total control of the organisation, and know everything that is happening within it (Weymes, 2001; Avery, 2005; Hamel & Prahalad, 2005; Ferdig, 2007; Sinclair, 2007).

In contrast, Stogdill (1974), Bass (1998), Avery (2004), Avery (2005), Hamel and Prahalad (2005) and Sinclair (2007), among others, have noted that ‘leadership is not just the province of the people at the top’. Criticism of traditional theories of leadership has led to the development of theories of leadership that take a more integrated approach to the concept, recognising that leadership ability does not reside solely with those occupying the executive rank within organisations. Sustainable leadership avoids the rigidity and hierarchical nature of traditional leadership theory, and emphasises stakeholders, long-term perspectives, environmental and social responsibility, teams and people – the Chief Executive Officer (or equivalent) is the ‘top team speaker’, rather than the ‘hero’ (Avery, 2005; Ferdig, 2007; Pratt & Pratt, 2010).

Within the sustainable leadership construct, leaders are those who deploy framing behaviours (the ‘sense-makers’) (Higgs & Rowland, 2005), and who may not always occupy formal positions of leadership (Post & Altman, 1994; House & Aditya, 1997; Avery, 2005; Ferdig, 2007). Wheatley (2001) notes that human networks always organise around shared meaning, while Smircich and Morgan (1982) describe this ability of the ‘sense-maker’ as ‘the management of meaning’, where leadership is a process of creating reality using available power bases in a constructive manner. In the sustainable leadership environment, leadership emerges in a natural and spontaneous manner, attributed to those who frame experience in ways that provide a viable basis for action through the creation of shared meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Wheatley, 2001). The key challenge is to manage meaning and create opportunities in such a way that individuals are able to come together, and explore, learn, devise courses of action and orient themselves to the achievement of desirable ends (Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Wheatley, 2001; Ferdig, 2007). In this way the leader becomes the change agent, the integrator, facilitator, coach and teacher, while simultaneously recognising that the eventual outcome/s are the product of teams and people (House & Aditya, 1997; Wheatley, 2001; Avery, 2004; Avery, 2005).

Sustainable leadership also recognises that certainty/uncertainty, predictability/unpredictability and control/lack of control are inherent to organisational life, in contrast to the more traditional view of complete order, rationality and linearity (House & Aditya 1997; Wheatley 2001; Kets de Vries 2004; Ferdig 2007). Wheatley (2001), Avery (2005) and Ferdig (2007), however, emphasise that this does not mean that activities associated with traditional leadership – strategic thinking and planning, risk management, coordinating, monitoring, communication and implementation – are redundant. On the contrary, sustainable leadership reaffirms the importance of these abilities, while radically expanding beyond the current boundaries of accepted views of leadership (Wheatley, 2001; Ferdig, 2007). Ferdig (2007) notes that this expansion enlarges the leadership base to include ‘everyday’ leaders in all walks of life, who take up power and engage in actions with others to make a sustainable difference in organisations and communities.

Contemporary theories of sustainable leadership are, therefore, capable of restoring the leadership-change management-organisational culture disconnect that has plagued the broad field of organisational theory for many years. It is timely that universities consider such issues, given the evidence suggesting that small-scale action by interest groups, while valuable, is not sufficient on its own to lead the embedding of sustainability in the mainstream business of universities (Bekessy, Clarkson & Samson, 2007).

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Universities are not immune from the pressures of market competition, and must also engineer a position for themselves whereby they attract and retain stakeholder loyalties. This includes students (consumers), but also employees, communities, industry, government, professional/accrediting associations, regulators and others. However, the benefits for universities of being sustainable extend beyond stronger competitive advantage in the marketplace in relation to student recruitment, funding grants, opportunities for research commercialisation, infrastructure partnerships and other important elements that contribute to reputation and, more prominently in recent years, national and international performance rankings.

By engaging in sustainability initiatives themselves, universities are able to contribute directly to society through being models of sustainable practice; through deploying teaching and learning practices that contribute ‘sustainability aware’ graduates to society and the workforce; through expanding the sustainability frontier in the course of undertaking research activity and engaging in partnerships with commerce and government; and through supporting and encouraging sustainability initiatives in the community through engagement, outreach and advocacy

programs. As a result, the decision-making that drives the development and implementation of sustainability programs in universities tends to be complex, as universities are attempting to address more than potential gains in relation to financial savings and increased operational efficiency. The decision-making impacting these programs is also affected by issues such as the institution's mission and values; perceptions of moral obligation to the student body, key stakeholders, and to society at large; and the aspiration to be leaders in relation to sustainable education, research and practice. These types of decisions need to be properly costed, evaluated, consulted upon and re-evaluated several times before final solutions are agreed and implemented.

However, research to date has broadly indicated that elements of the entire internal organisational landscape of universities can adversely impact on their sustainability programs, including leadership/management models that are traditional/hierarchical and inflexible in nature; how sustainability as a concept/problem and/or project is defined, staffed and funded; the rigidity and inflexibility of organisational structures and cultures; and strategies deployed by staff to resist change (for example, Carpenter & Meehan, 2002; Thomas, 2004; Sammalisto & Arvidsson, 2005; Thompson & Green, 2005; Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008).

RESEARCH METHOD

The focus of the research was on universities located in the Sydney metropolitan basin and outer regional areas. The Sydney area has a large number of universities and other tertiary education providers, servicing hundreds of thousands of students (both on-campus and by distance education/offshore), and diverse socio-economic demographic areas. This translates to a concentrated institutional cluster and correspondingly high levels of market competition. This is exacerbated by the fact that education services, particularly with regard to higher education, are now a major export commodity – it is estimated that in terms of export revenue in 2007, education services accounted for approximately \$13 billion, second only to coal and iron ore, with higher education being the most significant contributor to the export of education services² (Reserve Bank of Australia 2008).

Coupled with these issues is the fact that most of Australia's population is concentrated in coastal areas, and a large proportion of this in south-east Australia. Sydney is Australia's largest urban area (comprising some 4.5 million people), with Newcastle and Wollongong comprising major regional hubs within a few hours' travel of the Sydney metropolitan basin. This has resulted in significant environmental pressures on this geographical area at a time when Australia continues to suffer from the effects of the worst drought and flooding on record, coupled with what was referred to as the Global Financial Crisis³ and resulting downturn in the international education market – and the populations of these centres continue to increase. Universities are also extremely resource intensive organisations, with billions of dollars of assets and revenues under management, and operated by thousands of staff, both academic and general. The need for universities to properly manage their sustainability programs is imperative under these conditions.

Four universities agreed to participate in the research. These institutions are large universities by Australian sector standards, with high levels of both overall growth, and market share, as indicated by first preference numbers within the state of New South Wales. One was an inner metropolitan institution, one inner suburban, one outer suburban, and one institution was a regional university located in a large urban centre outside the Sydney basin. All four participating universities have sustainability programs in place, although the programs differ in age, complexity, scope and level of progress made to date.

As a first step, a search was conducted across each university's website to determine the nature and extent of sustainability education in each institution's professional development programs. The document collection process involved a longitudinal approach, with documents collected during the period September 2008 – June 2009, and August 2010. This approach was adopted due to two of the universities' websites being under construction in 2009, and also because all four universities were expanding their sustainability programs at the time the research was being conducted. A longitudinal approach was, therefore, regarded as necessary in order to accurately reflect the

² Latest available data as confirmed on 26 November 2010 from Australian Bureau of Statistics, via Reserve Bank of Australia

³ Commencing in 2007/2008 and fuelled by the collapse of the subprime mortgage market in the United States, the effects of the crisis continue to be felt in 2010/2011, with the ongoing bailouts of European economies in particular by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and the application of 'austerity measures' to economies in Europe and the United States

content of the four universities' sustainability websites/documentation for the purposes of this research. The final dataset comprised 324 document items, and 'dumped' copies of each university's sustainability website as at 31 August 2010 – a total of 332 data items.

Semi-structured interviews were then held with between seven and 10 interviewees from each institution, with representatives from senior management, executive leadership, academic staff (research and teaching) and general staff. 34 interviews were conducted between November 2009 and May 2010, in accordance with an approved protocol.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Website Search

Reviewing the material available on the participating universities' websites did not provide any significant insight into how these organisations viewed the integration of leadership and change management practice and behaviour, in particular as this relates to their sustainability programs. Focussing the analysis on institutional annual reports, as well as sustainability strategy documents, policies and action plans, did reveal some key points:

1. Each institution notes that it is 'committed' to sustainable practice, with three of the institutions also noting that they are signatories to the Talloires Declaration';
2. Words or phrases such as 'obligation', 'best practice', 'ethical', 'leadership', 'engagement', 'communication', 'education', 'awareness' and 'responsibility' feature prominently in these types of documents;
3. Executive and management support is articulated as being key to the achievement of each institution's sustainability program.

The analysis indicated that there a clear understanding by each institution of the importance of executive leadership support for such programs. Indeed, each institution has an identifiable champion at the executive level who provides direct support and leadership to their institution's sustainability program. However, there was little indication of how the executive leadership team as a whole leads the management of change as part of facilitating the achievement of identified sustainability goals and objectives. Of the four participating institutions, only one institution had identified the need for sustainability key performance indicators for each executive team member's portfolio, along with the deployment of these down through portfolio line management responsibilities. These executive-level key performance indicators were progressively being identified and implemented as this research was being conducted.

Interviews

Preliminary analysis of the interview data from the four participating universities offers some reasons as to why integrating leadership and change management practices and behaviours at universities appears to be so problematic. On a positive note, there is clear recognition that a sustainability-educated and aware leadership, which leads by example, is regarded as key to the achievement of sustainability programs. However, most interviewees felt that university leadership cultures and promotion practices as they currently exist are incompatible with the leadership models required to produce leader behaviour that will result in long-term organisation-wide transformative change.

...you mentioned...issues like leadership and what impact that might have on how we think about sustainability. I think that goes beyond saying have we got someone who's beating the drum really hard in relation to sustainability and pushing the University. I think the leadership issue is one that's most successful when everyone takes on that responsibility, and everyone takes on a leadership role...everyone picks up and perceives that they...have got key leadership responsibilities...and if we get that message out that everyone's a leader in what they're doing, there'll be a whole lot of little gains and little changes that will add up to quite substantial change.

...I don't think that most leaders are prepared for sustainability...as a sustainable leader it's about a characteristic of something that you hold that is part of who you are...if you're going to be a leader in this sector then I think you have to get your head around this...I know every time we make a decision I have to factor that in. And it's just simply that triple bottom line thinking with everything, and it's not something you just say 'Oh, well I'll just ignore it today because it doesn't matter'.

Further, there did not appear to be a clear understanding in a general sense of how to develop this kind of leadership within existing institutional frameworks, while the inclusion of sustainability in performance accountability systems appears to be almost taboo. However, those that did refer to performance accountability were very clear about the need to do this in order for the institution to be able to systematically demonstrate outcomes and impact, and embed sustainability into decision-making at all levels.

... if an organisation is to have sustainability as part of its core activity, then that has to become part of the selection process, and assessment and performance and award systems...so it has to be... seen as a core activity, not as a desirable add-on. And I think probably you would have to say that for most senior managers, perhaps other than the people who have specific responsibility for facilities, energy...you get a sense that they're the only people who are being judged by those things, whereas the head of an academic department or the head of a school, or a Dean...wouldn't have those things in their job description.

While the difficulty in implementing change in universities was also recognised, it was also clear from the interview data that change management is often viewed as an issue completely separate from institutional leadership practice and behaviour. This disconnect in perspective was particularly marked amongst interviewees who viewed change management from a purely industrial relations perspective, rather than from a perspective of facilitation, education, learning and achievement.

...I think most universities...are not change capable...Universities are very good at 'what', and absolutely useless at 'how'...They're great at talk, because people are trained to talk, so when in doubt they just love the idea of 'Ready, aim, aim, aim, let's have another meeting, aim, let's bring in a consultant, aim, oh, it's Christmas, see you in March'. And they're not that hot at ready, fire, aim.

...the more fundamental problem is that there is not a value in higher education for the importance of having a capacity for change. The most exciting universities are the ones who have accepted that change is always with us...the point of creating a capacity for change and openness to change is to learn not to demonise change, and that's a big shift for higher ed...

When I came into the higher education sector, I was dumbfounded by both the need and the desire to socialise everything to the point where if the broader group decided 'You know what, it may be the right thing to do but we don't want to do it', it didn't happen. Change management, actually creating change, within higher ed, is probably one of the most difficult sectors to try it in. Even within the government sector I watched people do it more quickly than in the higher ed sector. Here you're dealing with a community which has this credo of creative freedom – you cannot stymie my right to talk, my right to think, my right to this, my right to that, and it just overlays everything you try to do, so instigating, implementing, putting in place change is very, very difficult.

CONCLUSION

Poor leadership practices and a failure to manage change have frequently been identified as impediments to the 'mainstreaming' of sustainability in universities. However, little consideration has been given to the idea that it is the integration of these two factors that is the critical factor overall – that leadership itself is an issue in change management; and that leading the management of change is crucial to successful implementation of sustainable practice.

This paper has examined these issues within the context of preliminary analysis conducted upon interview data gathered from universities located in Sydney, Australia. This analysis demonstrates that, while their on-paper commitment to sustainability is admirable, universities tend to persist with leadership and change management

models that negatively impact efforts to embed sustainability programs on a whole-of-institution basis. This analysis also demonstrates that universities continue to view leadership and change management as mutually exclusive constructs. In fact it is their integration, through leading the management of change, which enables real organisational transformation.

This analysis further supports research conducted in other industry sectors which demonstrates that leading sustainable practice is characterised by executive-level support for appropriate change management practices in order to achieve long-term organisation-wide transformative change.

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