Chapter 14

Leading Sustainability through Projects

Lynn Crawford

Bond University, Australia & Australia and Human Systems International Limited, Australia

ABSTRACT

Business leaders are embracing sustainability not only as a matter of corporate social responsibility but because it offers opportunities for competitive advantage. As corporate activities are increasingly undertaken in the form of projects, project leaders have the opportunity to assist corporations in achieving their sustainability goals by incorporating sustainable practices in both the products they produce and the practices they use to produce them. Good project management is ultimately concerned with the most effective use of resources, which is a key tenet of sustainability. This chapter provides project leaders with practical guidance for incorporation of sustainable development principles in all aspects of their projects.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is gaining ground as a key concern of corporations. It is being embraced by business leaders not only as a matter of corporate social responsibility but because it offers opportunities for competitive advantage. As an increasing number of organizations are project based and even those entities that retain more functional structures are implementing strategies, organizational changes, sustainability initiatives and other corporate activities in the form of projects, there is significant potential for leadership in sustainability to be taken by the project management community.
In addition to the significant amount of corporate activity being undertaken through projects, there are aspects of project management that inherently support sustainability initiatives. One such aspect is that good project management is ultimately concerned with the most effective use of resources which is a key tenet of sustainability. Another is that transparency and disclosure are central requirements of sustainability reporting and good project management processes and practices provide transparency and an excellent audit trail for bringing sustainability achievements to account.

Unless specifically stated as a project requirement, project managers may feel they are limited by the objectives of their projects from incorporating sustainability principles. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the increasing importance of corporate social responsibility and sustainability to organizations in terms of competitive advantage, good governance and survival, and the many practical ways in which project managers can take a leadership role in sustainability through all of their projects.

BACKGROUND

In offering the most widely accepted and used definition of sustainability, the Brundtland Report (The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) specifically states that consideration should not be limited to physical sustainability but should include every aspect of social, political and economic activity, positioning sustainability as a key aspect of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Corporate concern about social responsibility tends to be seen as a relatively recent phenomenon, but a belief that businesses have obligations to the society in which they operate can be traced back to the early twentieth century. There is a link here with project management because the earliest management scholar to address this issue was Henry Gantt, best known to project managers for creation of the Gantt or bar chart. As early as 1919 Henry Gantt advocated that companies should serve society (Whetten et al. 2007).

Business was slow to respond to such ideas. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century, following publication of a Harvard Business Review article on the subject (David, 1949), that there was any interest shown in incorporating ideas of social responsibility into management education. Growing popularity of the concept of corporate social responsibility during the 1950s and 60s was vigorously criticized by economist Milton Friedman who articulated the widely held view that “the proper social responsibility of business is to focus on wealth creation, and to leave other social institutions to solve social problems” (Whetten et al., 2007, p. 380).

Serious concern for the effects of global population explosion, pollution and poverty emerged in the early 1970s and the first United Nations major conference on environmental issues was held in 1972. In the early 1990s, corporate social and environmental responsibilities were recognized in the concept of the Triple Bottom Line, which expands traditional financial corporate reporting to include environmental and social performance (Elkington, 1994; Garnaut, 2008). The World Business Council for Sustainable Development, a global association of around 200 international companies, was created in 1995.

In the 21st century, the strength of public support for social responsibility and sustainability, amplified by social media, was such that being seen to be doing the right thing became a motivator of corporate sustainability initiatives. A variety of factors are forcing companies to translate good intentions into positive action. Investors are recognizing links between social responsibility and economic viability of companies (Prairie, 2011), and shareholder demands for corporate accountability are emerging as key drivers of sustainability initiatives (Ernst & Young, 2011; Mell & Mathiasen, 2011).
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