

Inspiring Action for Sustainable Business: A Five-Phase Approach

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Abstract

Given the serious nature of environmental and social problems that currently face the world, it is imperative that business programs offered by higher education institutions provide a balanced approach to educating future business leaders. Part of a successful approach to business education will involve inspiring a sense of urgency among students regarding the needs of many aspects of society. This chapter will describe a sustainable business course intended to teach students the importance of leading businesses that balance economic, environmental, and social

concerns. Presented in five phases, a detailed description of the structure of the course is provided. The concluding sections of the chapter contain an analysis of what was learned from the course design process along with a discussion of sustainability education issues that need addressing in the future.

Introduction

Traditional business education has focused, nearly exclusively, on economic factors where students are taught strategies to maximize profits. However, decades of experience have shown that a singular focus on economic factors produces business leaders who carry these perspectives into the community and run organizations that frequently maximize profits at the expense of the environment and society. A new approach to business education is needed to ensure that students understand that running a successful business involves more than the short term economic factors that often define an organization. Increasingly consumers are paying attention to the environmental impacts of companies and are using this information in purchasing decisions. This is becoming an important driver in business strategy.

Changes in the way business is conducted cannot come quickly enough. The world is in need of a new approach to organizational leadership. Both business and academia can be at the forefront of these changes with intentional action. Business must choose strategies founded in social and environmental responsibility while higher education institutions must prepare the drivers of these strategies.

This chapter will introduce a course on Environmental and Corporate Responsibility that was designed and delivered at City University of Seattle in 2010. First, the need for the course will be reviewed, followed by a description of its five phases addressing specific outcomes that the course designers intended. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the extent to which the course was successful in accomplishing its goals.

Background

Only recently has sustainability—or its commonly accepted synonym, sustainable development—entered mainstream consciousness in the United States (Bardaglio & Putman, 2009). While experts focus on the dangers of carbon emissions and the many possible bleak outcomes that await us if emissions go on unchecked, sustainable development entails much more than carbon. Several of the frameworks currently in vogue regarding sustainability include the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Natural Step (TNS), and the Triple Bottom Line (TBL). All three point out that sustainable practices involve the use and disposal of the earth's resources; the impacts that we are having on air, water, and the planet's ability to regenerate itself; and the social aspects of our actions including fair labor, community impacts, and economic well-being.

While many look to business as the agent of change in regard to sustainable development, academic institutions are also well suited to take on such challenges (Rappaport & Creighton, 2007). Universities around the US are adopting the message of sustainable development in two key ways. First, many have undergone significant efforts to reduce carbon footprints, such as eliminating waste sent to landfills, limiting resource utilization, and even planning new campus buildings that meet acceptable green building standards. Second, a number of institutions around the country now offer academic programs aimed at educating future business leaders about the need to run their organizations in a sustainable manner. The hope is that a sufficient number of graduates will get the message and will begin to help American companies change course in their future business strategies.

An urgent need for a change in course seems apparent. All plausible projections indicate that civilization is on the cusp of exceeding the planet's ability to support it (Flannery, 2009; Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, & Schley, 2008). In late 2007 Rajendra Pachauri, director of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said, "What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment" (Pachauri, as cited in Friedman, 2009, p. 43). Dumaine (2008) cited research from the

Pentagon that described famine, widespread rioting, and even war to be expected as nations fight to defend or expand their dwindling supplies of food, water, and energy. Despite its wealth and military power, the US will not be shielded from the impacts of these events.

Yet while a pressing need exists to address issues related to sustainable development, too few academic institutions are answering the call, and those that do are often providing only rudimentary coverage of these topics. Academic business programs that have traditionally focused solely on the economic aspects of business are slow to change (Weybrecht, 2010). This is further complicated by the fact that nearly 45 percent of the courses in business programs are taught by adjunct faculty who do not have the connection to campus-wide sustainability initiatives that their fulltime, resident counterparts do (Kirk & Spector, 2009). Many part-time faculty members tend to be practitioners hired to bring field-related expertise to their courses. Their relationship to their universities rarely extends beyond the requirements of their courses. Hence, campus-wide sustainability initiatives have little impact on what they teach. Therefore, even in institutions where sustainability is a priority, a significant number of business courses may not address it.

Student Motivation to Learn About Sustainability

In 2009 a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center ranked the issues that Americans cited as the highest priorities for that year. At the bottom of the list of twenty concerns was climate change; nineteen other issues ranked above it, including terrorism, energy, deficit reduction, and even moral decline. Gertner (2009) points to research to suggest that environmental issues and climate change, indicated as pressing by many experts, are viewed by many Americans as distant problems both in time and space. Many Americans believe that these are issues happening elsewhere and that they can be dealt with in the future. Even when confronted with direct evidence, as in rural Alaska where evidence of climate change is present, the issue remains a distant concern.

Goleman (2009) points out that our current way of life has removed and desensitized us to many of the traditional threats to our survival. For the most part, we are safe from the dangers posed by the environment. We rarely worry about freezing, starving, or being consumed by a predator. The downside of this is that we are lulled into a false sense of security and our separation from the environment has allowed us to make short-term decisions that collectively have catastrophic long-term impacts. Due to the long-term nature of the threats related to environmental and social problems and our perception that they pose no real, direct danger to us, we feel safe in ignoring them.

Additionally, most business schools provide a nearly exclusive focus on the financial, economic, logistical, and strategic factors associated with a traditional business education. Most students expect this type of traditional focus in their business programs as, in many cases, the primary motivation for attending business school is to earn a degree that will teach them how to enhance their economic well-being. Given these factors, how can academic institutions work to expand the perspectives of their students in regard to sustainability? How can they get them to see the need to focus as much of their energy on social justice and environmental protection as they traditionally have on economic factors? Is there a way to link the environmental and social aspects of sustainability to economic drivers to ensure students can see a clear business case for all three?

Delivering Sustainability Education

In 2008 the School of Management at City University of Seattle set out to incorporate sustainable business into its MBA program. To accomplish this task, four sustainability courses were added to a program core allowing students to specialize in Sustainable Business. Students could also earn a graduate certificate in Sustainable Business. The goals of the program were to introduce students to the problems that require a sustainable approach and then provide them with a set of tools to prepare them for the

unprecedented challenges they would likely face as future business leaders.

The first version of the program fell short, as it focused too much on specific management behaviors. It failed to make the case for the importance of sustainability, and students could not see the urgency; there was not enough of a push to get students to shift away from the economic paradigm. In 2010 a small but significant change was made to the program. The first sustainability course was replaced with a new course that did a better job presenting a sense of urgency for social and environmental issues. It was based on a number of intended student outcomes. In this course students were to:

- Evaluate the various environmental problems including pollution, waste management, and global warming along with the drivers that are causing these problems as they relate to business.
- Assess the systems, both locally and internationally, that have caused significant environmental problems. Describe the role of companies and individuals in contributing to these problems.
- Explain the consequences of a failure to address environmental problems on both a local and global level.
- Explain the concept of sustainability as it applies to business, society, and the environment.
- Demonstrate how environmental problems have an impact on social justice.
- Analyze arguments concerning what the role of business should be in addressing environmental concerns.

These outcomes were to be achieved through five distinct course stages, each of which is described in the sections to follow.

Stage 1: Creating a Sense of Urgency

For students to view the future of business in a new way, they needed to be made aware of the severity of the problems that the

world currently faces while understanding the extent to which those problems could impact them, their families, and their communities in a much more immediate sense. They also needed to know the full scope of problems that were contributing to environmental decline and social injustice. Additionally, while knowledge regarding climate change seems to be increasing in the business community, it is only a small part of the challenges that will require a new business paradigm. There was also an urgent need for students to understand issues concerning pollution, disease, resource utilization, biodiversity destruction, and the extent to which problems such as these were contributing to the decline in the quality of life for an increasing number of the world's population. All of these topics were of significant interest to the instructional designers at City University as they created the first phase of the new sustainability course.

Myriad resources are available to present the large number of social and environmental problems that are an outgrowth of our traditional approach to business. The instructional designer's choice of *The Necessary Revolution* (2008) by Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, and Schley was made largely based on the first four chapters, which present a comprehensive review of a number of environmental and social problems as well as the actions and mindsets that created them. To further establish a sense of urgency, the students were asked to select an environmental problem and conduct an in-depth analysis to ensure that they understood the complexity of the systems that created and sustained these issues. The goal of this assignment was to solidify students' understanding of at least one serious environmental problem, and by sharing what they had learned, they were given the ability to expand the perspectives of each other on a number of sustainability-related fronts. From the syllabus the requirements of the assignment were as follows:

Students should select a problem and conduct a high-level review of books, articles, or the Internet to identify the way in which the problem results from the actions of corporations or specific industry practices. The successful paper will use concise and clear writing, with tables and graphics

as appropriate; describe a corporate practice that damages the environment; describe the type of damage (i.e., damage to forests, communities, etc.); describe the degree of damage; discuss potential consequences if the problem is not addressed; and offer alternative sustainable business practices to replace the current damaging practice.

The activities in this first stage helped set a baseline of understanding regarding the types of problems that warranted urgent action on the part of current and future business leaders. They also underscored the need for a different direction in business and presented preliminary information regarding the value of a sustainable approach in organizational leadership. Another goal of this phase was to raise concern on the part of the students as they began to get a clearer picture of the state of the world and the ways in which businesses were contributing to these conditions.

Stage 2: A Need for Action

The next stage built upon the first; it was intended to demonstrate the likely outcomes of current environmental and social problems if the world fails to act in a decisive way. To this end students were asked to select one current environmental problem and conduct an analysis of what was likely to happen should no action be taken to resolve the given problem. The list of environmental problems found in Senge et al. (2008) provided a good starting point; however, students were welcome to select a problem from another source. The assignment asked students to examine topics such as coastal erosion, water pollution, or agricultural decline over a span of twenty to one hundred years. They were then asked to seek supporting secondary research regarding their selected problem and to cite sources as they produced an impacts paper that provided an assessment of the likely conditions that would result from a failure to act. From the syllabus the text of this assignment included the following requirements:

Researchers are calling for swift and decisive action to avoid many of the worst potential impacts of environmental issues. Many have predicted severe impacts to coast lines, water supplies and agriculture, just to name a few. The problem is that the general public is largely shielded from any discussions of the potential impacts of environmental problems as these subjects are not popular discussion topics in the media. Yet, understanding the likely impact of inactivity is a key in motivating people to take action.

Through this assessment, students will select an environmental problem and find and summarize scholarly sources that project what might happen in 20, 50, or 100 years if no action is taken to rectify the chosen problem. Students should be specific in their projections and should cite their sources. The question to be answered here is: “Based on current research, what is the world likely to look like if we do nothing to solve a selected environmental problem?”

To supplement this investigation, students read Flannery’s (2009) *Now or Never*, which underscores the need for action and highlights the dangers associated with inactivity. Flannery also provides some specific measures that societies can take in crafting responses to climate change. He concludes his book with a number of perspectives provided by well-known individuals from the fields of environmentalism, business, and ethics.

This stage of the course was intended to ensure that students had a fuller understanding of the seriousness of the problems they were likely to face as future business leaders. Flannery’s arguments also provide an element of hope, allowing students to realize their ability to have a real impact on these problems. This also served as a transition into the next stage of the course.

Stage 3: Establishing a Position

As business students gained knowledge about environmental and social issues, the hope was that they would be inspired to

act. Yet such action was likely to meet resistance in a number of different forms, such as disinterest or outright opposition. It was important to help students establish a position on these issues and to do so in a way that was genuine and natural. Once students established positions, it would be helpful to show them how to strengthen their views and stand firm in the face of potential opposition.

To this end students were asked to identify an argument put forward by someone in favor of or opposed to environmental action and to conduct a critical analysis of that argument to assess its validity. Students were asked to analyze the argument and the supporting evidence as part of an effort to determine the extent to which the argument was based in fact or opinion. The goal was to help students strengthen their skills at identifying the many methods that are used to obscure the issues related to sustainability and to counter those methods when making a case in favor of sustainable action. The text of the assignment was as follows:

Much of the reason for the lack of response to environmental issues can be attributed to “experts” who argue that these problems don’t really exist. The most common argument has been that global warming is a myth or that it is a naturally occurring process. Corporations and governments have cited such arguments to support their decisions to take no action in response to environmental problems even though the vast majority of the scientific community holds a different position.

Knowing how to analyze the various arguments can be a key in understanding and analyzing them. It is important for students to be able to dissect an argument, analyze its validity, check its sources, and then offer an informed response in support of or against the position of the argument’s authors. This exercise will allow students the chance to identify a book, article, or broadcast where an argument is made for or against the need for action to resolve environmental issues. The student is to deconstruct that argument and analyze its components for validity and critical

support. Then the student should show why the argument is or is not valid and offer a response to the authors of the argument.

At the same time that students were conducting their analyses of arguments, they were reading McDonough and Braungart’s (2002) *Cradle to Cradle*. This was in contrast to the content from the two previous books that discussed the dire threats posed by environmental and social problems. It was time to turn students’ attention to possible solutions. McDonough and Braungart’s work presented new ways of thinking that was solutions-focused without drilling too deep into specifics. The goal was to begin to get students to think about solutions that they could be a part of as future business leaders. This transitioned into the final book of the course, discussed below, that presented a number of solutions that companies around the world were taking as part of a new sustainable business paradigm.

Stage 4: Link to Social Justice

In its first three stages, the focus of the course was primarily to address environmental concerns. However, it has been noted in the literature that environmental concerns often lead to social problems that impact a society’s quality of life (Rappaport & Creighton, 2007; Weybrecht, 2010). Additionally, it has been noted around the world that the environmental actions of rich countries have a disproportionate impact on poorer nations. These issues needed to be addressed to give students a fuller understanding of the social side of sustainability. Thus, an effort was made during the design of the course to directly link environmental problems with social concerns and to present those links within the framework of corporate social responsibility.

Not only was it important for students to understand social issues at a macro level, but they needed to understand how the decisions they might make as business leaders were likely to impact the communities and stakeholders that they interacted with. This was to offset any possible sense of removal. Once the stu-

dents knew that their actions led to potentially negative impacts, they could then take a different approach in the leadership of their organizations. They were encouraged to be responsible business managers by having a fuller understanding of those who would be impacted by their actions. The description of the assignment included the following requirements:

Many experts have pointed to the relationship between environmental problems and social injustices that often result directly from the decision and actions of polluters. A specific example would be a corporation that pollutes a river rendering it toxic to downstream residents who may depend on it for drinking water and irrigation. Many other examples have been cited, some of which have global implications.

Students are to survey the literature to find such connections, analyze them and their impacts, and provide a 5-8 page summary in which they include arguments, provided by researchers and scholars, which show that social injustice can directly result from the creation and/or neglect of environmental problems. Areas of focus might include agriculture, access to clean water, fishing rights, coastal preservation, or food distribution networks. The goal of this assignment is to see the real impacts of environmental problems in human terms so it will be important to note the links between the environment and the conditions of those that depend on the environment.

As students were analyzing the ties between environmental problems and social impacts, they were also reading Dumaine's (2008) *The Plot to Save the Planet*, which begins with the same warnings as many other books on climate change but spends a majority of its effort presenting cases of companies around the world that are taking real action to address environmental problems. This was to show students that, despite the concerns that are impacting many different parts of the world, large, powerful organizations are recognizing the need for action. These organi-

zations are embracing new operational methods that account for pressing environmental and social needs. The goal in including Dumaine's book was to show students that action can be taken not only on an individual basis but among large institutions as well.

Stage 5: A Call to Action

The final phase of the course was a call to action issued to students, giving them the opportunity to respond to environmental or social problems that they have identified in their own communities or organizations. It was an opportunity for them to take what they had learned from the books and assignments in the first four phases of the course and put it to use in an applied real-world fashion. The description of the assignment included the following requirements:

Corporate responsibility is demonstrated through actions and solutions. Understanding problems and their impacts, from environmental to social, is part of the work. Enacting the solution and shifting the trends is the rest.

Students are to identify a problem area with which they are familiar, in the workplace, industry or community, and provide a summary of that problem and its implications across the areas discussed by the course materials. Statements of implications need to be supported by literature corroborating either the student's specific conclusions or describing similar situations and related impacts.

Students will then identify an action approach including initiating steps that can be followed by participants in the workplace, industry or community. The action approach proposed needs to be supported by literature providing examples of this approach applied elsewhere along with the results. The goal of this assignment is to personalize the need to take action to improve environmental prob-

lems and identify ways to act on corporate social and environmental responsibility.

This assignment was the student's final project as they completed the course. For many it concluded the process of building a foundation in sustainable business that they could carry forward into further study of these topics.

As stated earlier the overall purpose of this course was to increase awareness of the fact that business is more than the traditional disciplines associated with academic business programs. The hope was that students would recognize the impacts of the environmental and social problems currently facing the world and would be compelled to take action with a newfound appreciation of the urgency of these issues. Not only did the course deliver what the designers hoped it would, but the work of the students exceeded all expectations.

Results

This course was offered for the first time in the fall of 2010 as the opening course for the sustainable business series offered to MBA and certificate students. It was offered in an online format through the university's Blackboard learning management system. As the course ran, it became clear through a number of indicators that it was going to be a success.

The first of these success indicators was the quality of the discussions occurring in the discussion boards. Students were actively engaged in contributing important content in their posts. A second indicator of success was the quality of the work that students were submitting through their assignments. They were engaged and willing to provide the type of effort necessary to generate high quality work. This level of quality was seen on a number of the assignments. As the course finished, students had the chance to submit evaluations which provided an additional indicator of success, showing positive remarks both in regard to the course and the instructor.

A major key to the success of this course was the instructor, who made sure students understood the significance of the course's content. Having an interest in sustainability, the instructor was able to contribute important suggestions and content both to the syllabus and to the Blackboard shell. Through these activities the instructor became an important part of the design team and created the final assignment to address the need to ask students to take action. Even more evident and important was the instructor's commitment to her students along with her understanding of the challenges they faced as they worked through topics that were likely to require them to change their fundamental approach to business. In a course that challenges students to this extent, a skilled instructor can make a substantial difference. In this particular case, the course evaluations underscored the success of the instructor with one student even referring to her as "inspiring."

Future Direction in Sustainability Education

Teaching business students about sustainability is challenging; some don't care, while many are simply focused on the traditional economic aspects of business. Still, a large portion of students have not had the opportunity to learn about sustainable business practices. Despite the urgency of problems that the world currently faces, the majority of businesses and universities continue to operate under a traditional business paradigm; they have yet to see the sustainability light. To do so requires overcoming two key challenges that have often plagued efforts to teach sustainable business in traditional programs.

The first challenge is the fact that most sustainable content in traditional business programs is contained within a single course or a group of courses. This approach falls short for students who either don't get enough exposure to these concepts or who choose not to take those particular courses. A different approach to business program design is needed. Given the importance of sustainability to the future of business, it should be fully integrated throughout the entire business curriculum. Moving forward, issues of sustainability are going to impact accounting,

marketing, leadership, operation, logistics, etc., and it should be included as part of all of these courses.

The second challenge comes from the fact that sustainability has traditionally been viewed as the antithesis of successful business. It has often been regarded as something for business to contend with or find a way to avoid. Many have seen it as a costly burden that impacts potential profits and creates unnecessary expenses. However, as Hitchcock and Willard (2009) point out, there is a clear business case for sustainability. These practices can save money, generate profits from new business ventures, and can position a company as socially responsible, which is becoming an increasing part of the criteria that consumers are using to choose products. There are real financial and economic benefits to attending to the environment and society as a whole. This presents an opportunity to integrate what has previously been seen as two competing forces into a singular approach to business that shows students an integrated way to respect all parts of the triple bottom line.

Conclusion

A key to educating future business leaders in regards to sustainability issues is to first establish a sense of urgency relative to the problems that we face. Once that urgency is established, students can begin to shift their focus toward solutions and new business paradigms that respect the economic, environmental, and social aspects that are a part of business now and will continue to be into the future. According to Pies, Beckmann, and Hielsher (2010), the role of business in society is to contribute to the solution of complex social problems. Thus, business education should teach management competencies to enable future managers to meet these societal demands. Academic institutions have a responsibility to prepare their students for all of the challenges they will face in the future. The traditional approach to business education simply no longer fits. It's time for a new model that is better matched to the needs of today's global community.

The experts are saying that our world is in trouble. We need to take immediate action to protect our air, water, land, and the many biospheres on which we depend from further degradation at the hands of businesses operating around the world. Given that the urgency of these problems is likely to increase in severity throughout this century, it is of paramount importance that academic programs fully prepare future business managers with the skills to lead their organizations with a balanced approach. Even when they are aware of the need to do so, academic and business leaders often cannot break from the traditional economic focus. The irony is that by focusing only on economic aspects and failing to respect those related to the environment and society, business and higher education are placing all three in jeopardy.

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