Sensemaking for Sustainability?

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Abstract

This paper is informed by ethnographic research undertaken over a two-year period in a medium-sized luxury hotel business that has won international recognition for sustainable business practice, claiming more than '101 ways to be sustainable'.

The research aims to understand 'how' leadership enables a successful business to have limited impact on ecological systems. The data I present in this paper concerns efforts made by staff to fulfil guest expectations for quality luxury service whilst adhering to the firm's ethics, values and philosophy to promote sustainability. As a Director explained: "We need to prove that actually taking sustainable business decisions isn't economic death."

I use this data to support the argument that by measuring and analysing 'what' action we take for sustainability, we are merely working with the surface issues and not addressing the root causes related to our thinking and behaviours. Unless we consider 'how' we do things, we disregard the relational and interconnected nature of things and, importantly, also neglect the fact that our

seemingly 'localised' actions have implications for others who are 'out of sight and out of mind' (Gore, 1992) in other parts of our shared world.

Sustainability challenges us to know the world in ways other than by our familiar mental ordering, to make sense and map multiple realities in new and less familiar ways. The application of dichotomous problem solving by separating and analysing makes no logical sense when applied to issues of ecological sustainability presenting paradox and contradiction. (Ferdig, 2007)

My ethnographic data illustrates how working to promote sustainability brings many seemingly simple everyday issues into the realm of 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973). These are not necessarily crisis situations or even strategic problems more generally associated with this definition and sensemaking process (Grint, 2005; Pye, 2005; Weick et al. 2005) but to do with the provision of daily commodities to meet contemporary lifestyle expectations.

Detailed stories unfold from my colourful data, describing how people work with these complex everyday wicked problems to reconcile 'ecological conscience and luxury' because, according to the hotel's General Manager: "the two things don't sit that naturally together".

The sheer scale of interconnected issues in any one decision can be immense, often why some people feel overwhelmed and powerless to influence the grand scheme of sustainability. (Parkin, 2010) How can we bridge the yawning gap between our local actions and ecological impact on a global scale?

Here in this case study we have empirical examples of the three basic tenents of sustainability: an economically viable business, social expectations (of in this case, luxury products) and concern for ecological impact. These collectively underpin whichever one of the multitude of definitions of sustainability one chooses to work with.

Sustainability as defined by the Brundtland Report in 1987[1] is still a relatively new subject, bringing together previously separate disciplines (Drath, 2001). We may be familiar with the core idea of sustainability, but what sustainability actually means in practice is still very much a contested issue (Jacobs, 1999; Connelly, 2007; Ladkin, 2008; Marshall et al. 2011).

More research is recommended in this area (Robinson, 2004; HRH. Prince of Wales, 2010; Walker et al., 2010; Marshal et al., 2011; Hardman, 2012; Lozano, 2012) and Redekop (2010) actually highlights a lack of leadership literature placing environmental sustainability 'centre stage'. He joins others in calling for more ecological approaches to balance the predominance of technological approaches for sustainability taken to date, also noted by others including Marshal et al., 2011, Hardman, 2012 and Lozano, 2012.

The current climate focussing on shareholder returns, monetary and materialistic values can be blind to the impact of our unsustainable actions as these are outweighed by short-term profit maximisation. In this context how can leadership influence sensemaking in such a way that values our relationship with all other forms of life on earth?

This paper recounts efforts made by one community to work beyond measurement and analysis, to challenge the status quo, identify things that make no sense and practice a different approach to sensemaking for sustainability. In so doing they begin to show an understanding of 'how' leadership can enable a successful business to have limited impact on ecological systems, connecting local actions to global issues.

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[1] "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 54) Retrieved from http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/42/ares42-187.htm December 2012.

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