

# Sustainability

## How to get from here to there

 By Andrew J. Hoffman

**W**hen we go into a company and try to change its sustainability strategy, we are working from a personal theory of change that reflects how we see the world and how we engage with it. It defines who we are and how we accomplish our life's work. And in many ways it defines what we will become. As Heraclitus said, "character is destiny."

E.B. White, the author of *Charlotte's Web*, wrote, "Every morning I awake torn between a desire to save the world and an inclination to savor it. This makes it hard to plan the day." This represents a universal tension. We are part of the world, and yet we want to change it, push it in new directions. This is a hard balance to strike. This is not a contest of *us versus them*—we are all in this together.

Yet people often think about environmental problems with an *us-versus-them* framework. For example, I often hear it stated that we are *addicted* to fossil fuels. But I have trouble with that metaphor. Addiction is an illness that is an aberration from healthy living. But on the issues of sustainability and climate change, we are all faced with the same challenge. In a sense, we are all addicts with the same malady, and there are no healthy people to gauge our behavior or doctors to cure us.

I think of the proper metaphor as one of a collective of people who are lost on a terrain they thought they knew but has now somehow changed. We may have had bad maps all along, but now we really don't know where to go. In defining a theory of change, what we need are leaders who have a vision of the direction we might go, while recognizing that they are a part of the world that it is lost.

### Three Parts to a Theory of Change

A theory of change has three parts:

**1. A statement of the current reality.** What kind of world do you see? As an example, over the past months the stock market has been reaching new heights. Is that the world you see? Or do you also recognize that unemployment remains frustratingly static and income inequality is widening? Do you see that sustainability is now mainstream, and yet many of our sustainability concerns continue to worsen: carbon dioxide levels will soon pass the critical threshold of 400 ppm; man-made chemicals permeate our environment; and there are measurable levels of ibuprofen in the Mediterranean Sea. What kind of world do you see?

I see a world in which we have now entered the Anthropocene—a geological epoch in which humans act as a force within the natural environment. We have taken a role in the operation of many of the Earth's systems. From now on, we are forever linked. This is a shift in how we think about ourselves, how we think about the role of business, and how we think about business education. It will be difficult to change these ways of thinking, but we have to do this hard work. Heed the warning of John F. Kennedy: "All too often, we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."

**2. A vision of a desired future.** What kind of future do you

see and what kind of world do you want to create? Where do you want to take us? What possibilities and opportunities for a bright future do you see? I challenge you to see a future that is optimistic, attractive, and one that includes a life of meaning, security, prosperity and happiness. That is a future vision that people will want to join you in striving for. We have no shortage of cynics today—and environmentalists tend to focus too much on the negative. The negative does not motivate people to follow a leader. Martin Luther King, Jr., did not have a *Nightmare* but rather a *Dream*. Leaders inspire people to action by creating a vision of a desirable future that they want, not by scaring them away from a past they don't. We need more visionaries who can see a way forward. What future do you see? Think about it. This will be the goal of your life's work.

**3. A path to get from one to the other.** What path will take you from one to the other? I hope that we will reject all black-and-white, binary statements of the problems we face. This lazy thinking is too much in vogue. It is far too easy to proclaim that we have the truth and that others are not only wrong but evil. If you attach yourself to a particular position exclusively and disbelieve all the rest, you'll likely lose much good and fail to recognize the real truth of the matter. The answers to today's sustainability problems do not reside in one discipline or one worldview. We need to work for the elusive middle way by understanding all sides and views of the issues we care about; not passing judgment easily, but instead seeing the complex fabric and the complex solutions – with a tolerance and compassion. We need to speak to and work with all kinds of people to find a common solution to our common problems. There is no other way. Dogmatism and absolutism will not get us there. Tolerance, compassion, and understanding will.

To lead people to a place they need to go, and may be rightly afraid to go, you can't just know the right thing to do. You need to feel it deeply enough to care and devote your life to it. You have to feel it to believe it. If you don't believe it, you will never get where you seek to go, and you certainly won't convince others to go there.

E.B. White continued: "But if we forget to savor the world, what possible reason do we have for saving it? In a way savoring must come first." As you strive to change the world and make it more sustainable, also love, cherish and savor it. You need to act with hope.

### Finding Hope

Hope is different than optimism. Optimism springs from some confidence based on a technical assessment that you're doing things that have worked in the past and thus you can rationally say, "This is going to work." Hope is a belief in the rightness of what you're doing, regardless of the technical assessment. In Vaclav Havel's words, it is "the certainty that something makes sense." Christopher Lasch says, "Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it." David Orr



adds, “Optimism is the recognition that the odds are in your favor; hope is the faith that things will work out whatever the odds. Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up.”

When faced with the problems of our day, I’m often asked if I am hopeful. My answer is yes. We have the power to change things as we pursue a vision for a hopeful world. What does it look like? That is for each of you to decide for yourselves and to pursue in your own way. I challenge you to find your calling or purpose—not just what you want to be but what were you meant to be.

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**We need profound cultural change to create a sustainable world. We need people who will think deeply, work diligently and never give up. We need those people in all sectors of society—people with the persistence to push forward, keep trying, find the answers.**

We need to wake up to the awesome power of business, and the awesome responsibility of leaders. They have the power to bring the world towards sustainability or towards ruin. Find a purpose in creating sustainable outcomes. If you don’t, if we all don’t set a personal vision of how we are going to leave the world a little better, then I believe we are all doomed. We need leaders who are driven by a sense of purpose, one that includes a willingness to roll up their sleeves and solve the real problems of our day.

According to the UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, “Humans have changed Earth’s ecosystems more in the past 50 years than in any comparable historical period.” We have increased species extinction rates by up to 1,000 times over rates typical for Earth’s history. Almost 25 percent of the world’s most important marine fish stocks are depleted or over-harvested, while 44 percent are fished at their biological limit and vulnerable to collapse. As we extract the world’s riches, we contaminate its atmosphere, altering our global climate through the unabated emission of greenhouse gases. And these impacts are not evenly distributed. The richest 20 percent consume over 75 percent of all private goods and services, while the poorest 20 percent consume just 1.5 percent. Of the 4.4 billion people in the developing world, almost 60 percent lack access to safe sewers, 33 percent have no access to clean water, 25 percent lack adequate housing, and 30 percent have no modern health services. The richest 3 people have assets that exceed the combined gross domestic product of the 48 least developed countries.

**But there are reasons to be hopeful.** The solutions to these problems must come from business—sustainable business. You can now work on sustainability strategies, sustainable products and operations, sustainability reports, and strive to become chief sustainability officers. But the solutions to the root problems go deep to the complexity of our economy and society. On that front, I also see signs of hope that we are changing the way

we think. The business world is in flux in some radical ways. We now live in a world where a 22-year-old part time nanny can start an online petition of 300,000 signatures and force the Bank of America to cancel plans to charge debit card users a \$5 monthly fee. Patagonia can start an exchange and ask its consumer to buy their products used on eBay before coming to the store to buy new. And the CEO of Unilever, Paul Pollman, can say that we need to think on longer time frames, that the concept of shareholder value has passed its “sell-by date” and that the company will no longer provide quarterly profit updates to shareholders. And that’s mild. He has also said that hedge fund managers would “sell their own grandmothers if they thought they could make a profit” and that “We are entering a time when the responsible business world is running ahead of the politicians.” This is radical stuff!

Sustainability requires that we change how we conceive of ourselves as people, not merely as consumers that are defined by what we possess and what we buy, but as people, defined by who we are and what we believe, and how we love the world around us, both human and natural. In the words of Dwight D. Eisenhower, “We must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage.”

**We need profound cultural change to create a sustainable world.** We need people who will think deeply, work diligently and never give up. We need those people in all sectors of society—people with the persistence to push forward, keep trying, find the answers. As you advance in your path to create the legacy, when you get discouraged recall these words by Thomas Edison: “Many of life’s failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.” Like a stonemason who has to hit a stone 100 times before it breaks. It is not the 100th hammer strike that breaks the stone. It is the 99 before it. To make that 100th strike with the hammer requires hope.

Take your time here to build your hope, find your calling, discover your vocation, create your vision for your part in building a sustainable world. Be different, think differently, live by the immortal words of George Bernard Shaw: “Some people see things as they are and ask why. Others dream things that never were and ask why not.” **LE**



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