

## VIEWPOINT – SEPTEMBER 2007

Thinking of Sustainability as a Dimension  
of Managerial Competency

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Sustainability is defined by the UN as the ability: “*to meet the needs of the present without sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet theirs.*” This is a broad definition indeed and one that is open to multiple interpretations. The United Nations adopted a set of goals and principles for environmentally sustainable development, known as Agenda 21, in Rio Earth Summit in 2001. Environmentally sustainable development is one of the United Nations Millennium goals.

Sustainability is not a simple issue to grasp. It is both pervasive and elusive; you know it is there but not so easy to picture it mentally so to speak. It strikes people’s mind deeply. It touches a certain raw nerve, perhaps even arousing a primal sense of insecurity against the elements and heightening people’s survival instinct. Will we run out of resources eventually and will the civilisation as we know it disappear due to overexploitation of the earth resources or catastrophes caused by humans? This type of questions will continue to reverberate in the minds of millions, many of whom do not generally trust the authorities and know full well that political expediency often takes over from long term thinking and action.

Is sustainability beyond the reach of governments to tackle? Probably not, though they cannot tackle sustainability alone; the entire industry and business community must get behind the philosophy and principles of sustainability. Essentially sustainability is not a methodology but a thinking dimension. All our actions need to be continuously informed and refreshed through the application of both formal and tacit processes and knowledge that reflect sustainability. If all concerned make a conscious effort to observe the sustainability dimension, it will make a difference locally and eventually globally. This has to happen while still achieving the goals of equity and social justice, also included in the UN Millennium goals, and without it the inclusive society that the human kind aspires to cannot be delivered.

The above discourse highlights the need for nurturing sustainability competence as a managerial competency in professional people alongside other core competences. It is imperative for managers and decision makers to develop and apply thinking models that result in outcomes that are financially sound, environmentally sustainable and socially responsible. Achieving such balanced outcomes is not easy and requires new insights, creativity and commitment.

Sustainability should be included as a dimension of the education of all professionals, particularly managers and decision makers. One of the excellent means for teaching sustainability is through project-based learning rather than discipline-based learning, as it provides a paradigm for creativity and achievement of balanced solutions. Professionals normally infuse their contributions through projects, and provided they have developed their sustainability sense one can assume that they will succeed in deriving sustainable solutions. This depends on their education and enculturation.

Do traditional educational models foster development of a sense for sustainability? Most traditional educational programmes promote normative thinking, whereas sustainability competence requires a degree of transformative thinking.

Transformative project-based learning may provide a better approach to education and enculturation of professionals and executives from a sustainability perspective. Project-based learning should not be confused with specialist degree programmes for environmental sustainability. These specialist degree programmes are limited in terms of impacting industry and community as a whole. Sustainability needs to be taught widely and as a dimension of professionalism in all fields. Put differently, we need to develop sustainability competence among all executives and professionals not just a few.

One solution is centred on holistic project-based internship programmes open to all graduates and executives -, structured yet flexible- fitting into a young professional's work and life style. Such schemes are different to the traditional discipline-based learning and development courses and can lead to recognised postgraduate qualifications. Also, it is desirable that specially formed educational institutions (not employer organisations) design and deliver such schemes with due academic recognition. All such schemes need to be robust while firmly anchored in the work environment. What is advocated is project learning through engagement in realistic assignments under mentoring with special focus on the sustainability dimension.



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