

Striving for Sustainability: Tools and Tips for Building a Sustainable Organization

An Interview with John Blattner, Ph.D. Estrella Partners

Companies are increasingly prioritizing sustainability- as a response to the economic conditions and in support of the greater environment. TalentQuest sat down with our partner John Blattner, at Estrella Partners, to discuss his expert opinion and insights on this critical focus area.

How has the economy affected the issue of organizational sustainability? Leadership sustainability?

Business has really streamlined operations during this recession. Business leaders are really reorganizing as a cost savings measure. Sustainable leadership is now catching up with the business world. Sustainable leadership is no longer flying under the banner of not-for-profits... now; it is truly a competitive advantage and a manner by which to continually improve the overall performance of an organization.

Sustainable leaders have the potential to create differentiators amongst corporate leaders. The differences between those that espouse those values and those that do not are currently small but is widening at a great pace. Those that are embracing it are really valuing it and living it. If current leaders don't understand its importance, they need to jump on board because it is critical to the future.

What are the biggest trends you are seeing with more organizations focusing on becoming 'more green?'

Right now, 'going green' is en vogue. There are really true believers now- those that are doing more than saying the slogan. We refer to those that are just lightly scratching the surface as "green washers"- they are doing it simply for the fad. We are finding, though, that more and more business leaders are getting on the bandwagon and making this a business priority. When current and future leaders understand the corporate and long term benefits 'going green' provides, they will see the business case for the efforts behind it, specifically three things: 1) the connection to the bottom line, 2) the innovation it drives and 3) the forward thinking push it gives the organization.

In your opinion, what types of initiatives are the best investments?

It can be very simple to get started. When it comes down to it, every little bit helps. We see it as a "triple loop", essentially tapping into a systems level approach that includes the 1) environment, 2) economics, and 3) society (whether it be the community or employees), starting with what can we do with our work environment with a focus on saving expenses and how can we as an organization help in our communities (i.e donating to food pantries, spring clean up, volunteering, etc.)

When you start within your organization and establish an internal “Green Team”, employees from different departments, seniority levels, etc. will start collectively seeking ideas, initiatives and what they can do to make a difference. They can research best practices from other companies and assess the costs associated with each and make recommendations for implementation.

Even if your organization is small and your Green Team consists of two people, it will still build sustainability practices and priorities within your company. It is important to note here the criticality of leadership support – if the leadership team is not ingrained, its importance will be perceived as simply lip service.

Where can companies who are just shifting focus to green initiatives get started? Any ‘quick wins?’

Many organizations are focusing on the ‘checklist’ – energy efficiency, recycling and encouraging a general environmental awareness and responsibility amongst employees. Though many of the leaders on this topic are really sitting down and putting together a footprint of carbon inventory for long range needs, we do find several of the quick, practical wins can really get a company started in the right direction. Several starting points that really can apply to companies of any size in any industry:

- Encourage communication by e-mail
- Turn off equipment when not in use- ensure this takes place at the end of the business day
- Reduce fax-related paper waste
- Look for renewable resources
- Extend product durability
- Use double-sided documents
- Purchase paper with maximum recycling content
- Choose suppliers that take back packaging for re-use
- Select ‘greener’ products for everyday use- cleaning solutions, etc.
- Reduce toxic dispersion

You perform ‘green health checks’ with your clients. What are you identifying and discovering with these?

We really start with establishing a baseline with our clients- determining where they are and setting a roadmap of where they need to be. We want to form a measurable checklist depending on their specific needs. This will vary depending on how they currently perceive the topic of sustainability and approach it. Some clients are very tentative initially and some are ready to embrace it, drive it and make it happen. Regardless of the timeframe and readiness level, again, the key here is leadership buy in for it to really become an organizational priority.

How are companies providing healthy workplaces for their employees? What are the best practices?

A lot can be achieved here without a lot of dollars. We see 5 critical components for a healthy workplace. Let's touch on each one briefly:

- 1) **Employee engagement**- Employees can really bring these initiatives to life. Many companies provide monetary incentives when employees come up with cost saving ideas?
- 2) **Employee development**- This area can go in so many different directions and is critical for the retention of your employees. This includes leadership webinars, career counseling, teambuilding, skill –based learning, undergraduate tuition reimbursement, flex time, comp time, etc.
- 3) **Health & Safety**- This is really an issue for all companies and really runs the spectrum. We see everything from on –site fitness centers and yoga classes to health risk assessments and flu shots to nursing centers and heart attack prevention.
- 4) **Employee recognition**- This is very high on my list. Not every person always wants more dollars in their pocket. When people enjoy what they are doing, they appreciate recognition for the value they are creating in the business.
- 5) **Work/life balance**- Again, this is across the board- Succession planning, money management, English as a second language, telecommuting, massage services, toastmasters on site, English as a second language. What is important here is to get a pulse on your employees' needs and interests, and respond specifically to those.

- ***What do you feel is the key for organizational sustainability?***

Commitment from senior management is an absolute must. If the buy-in is permeating the organization (i.e. through the types of employee committees I mentioned earlier), you will have an inherent competitive advantage, as this united approach will be an attractor to investors and employees alike. Investors equate conscientiousness with fiscal responsibility, and employees increasingly seek a cutting-edge, environmentally conscious environment.

What we have found really intriguing is the impact sustainability has on technology innovation. When you seek new perspectives, ideas, approaches, etc., invariably something innovative and unexpected results. This comes to life consistently within the Global Institute of Sustainability (GIOS) at Arizona State University who is pursuing initiatives for the likes of Wal-Mart. Technology innovation on the supply chain side is emerging every day, increasing operational efficiencies and encouraging sustainability.

- ***What's ahead for the issue of sustainable leadership?***

The first and foremost law is this: If you don't believe the messenger, you won't believe the message. Personal values drive commitment, and this is especially true in regards to sustainability.

These are the characteristics we consider essential for success as a sustainable leader:

Willingness to Embrace Change: A fundamental belief there is a 'better way' and a commitment to finding that better way, regardless of the current business is.

Systems Thinking: An ability to identify sustainable issues and balance these social conscience issues with bottom line growth.

Social consciousness: A genuine interest in the environment and social impact (rather than just 'golden parachutes.')

Business Acumen: An ability to link sustainability with the creation of shareholder value and the business sense to grow and development both business and social issues.

Adaptability: The capability to manage business process and change.

Resilience: Emotional stability, intelligence in dealing with a culture that resists change and the stamina to confront a board of directors and business leaders who could initially oppose ideas.

Inspiring: Ability to effectively communicate the message to build an organization that is reflective of core values.

Passion: Communication skills to drive innovation with a passionate vision and the creativity to broaden perspectives.

In terms of what's ahead for these sustainable leaders, I think you are going to see an interesting natural dichotomy in mindset across the categories of leadership in an organization. The senior level leaders (55 plus) are going to continue to exhibit a 'tribal knowledge' that they have acquired through years of skills and experience; the mid-level leaders (35-50) are going to continue to acquire more skills and the early-career leaders (25-35) are going to come into the workforce with a more formalized understanding on the importance of sustainability. Schools are now offering MBAs around sustainability, and the younger workforce is going to be more equipped with the tangible skills and know-how around this issue.

Organizations will need to look for leaders that have a sustainability consciousness, by perhaps offering a specific assessment in addition to a traditional interview. A Leadership Institute for Sustainability would really offer opportunities for leaders of all generations to level- set the criticality and application of this important topic.

Concluding Thoughts:

Sustainable organizations express alignment and integration among vision, mission, and strategy in everything they do. There are two dimensions to consider: 1) **Leader Development** which pertains to the self of a sustainable leader e.g. values, presence, embodied actions. 2) **Leadership Development** which pertains to a leader effectively guiding and influencing the sustainable future of the organization through people and processes with an eye to the bottom line of profit.

Leader development is not an event but a process by which individual leaders invest in their development over time to ensure increasing skill and knowledge about leading their organizations. Leadership Development is focused on the future direction of the organization. Continuing to review key people and upgrading when necessary will keep an organization competitive and sustainable. Therefore, a sustainable leader will create a sense of belonging and opportunity to their employees.