



# SUSTAINABILITY:

## A LEADER'S EVER-PRESENT PARADOX

**BY STEPHEN HOBBS**

A greater burden is placed on leaders today than has been the case in the preceding centuries. With the emergent knowledge of connections among living systems, leaders are recognizing their evolutionary and/or revolutionary role in activities like growth in employment, political stewardship, organization relevance, environmental stability, social resilience, technological advancements, security, and/or helping others in living their great life. No longer can leaders be ignorant of the fact that what they do today has an impact on tomorrow.

For leaders to intentionally ignore such systemic truths weakens the fabric of people's lives. They must acknowledge sooner than later that through their individual and collective knowing and doing they contribute on small or large scales to the sustainable development of their lives, groups, organizations, societies, and the world.

### **What is sustainability?**

On its most basic level sustainability is about living in the present without jeopardizing the future for generations who follow. Expanding on this definition for leaders, sustainability is about their present ability to support quality of life and standards of living that meet and integrate the existing interlinking socio-cultural, technological, environmental, economical, and political (quintuple bottom line) ecologies without compromising the well-living of future generations.

## Challenges

Every day leaders are 'STEEPed in sustainable challenges' (Socio-cultural, Technological, Environmental, Economical, and Political) that present themselves as external change. Because of these challenges leaders are well advised to expand the triple bottom line of social, environmental, and economic responsibility to include technological and political responsibility. Then, in response to these challenges, leaders who fashion and foster an internal reactive-from-proactive transition for the system level at which they lead contribute to their personal well-being, organization predictability, and community vitality.

What seems clear for all leaders is 'learning how to learn to know' about a more conscious evolution of sustainability. Along this path of awareness, attention, and intention, leaders may be guided by the following nine insights:

**1. People are involved** – and their decisions about sustainability are influenced and guided by the foreground (speak and hear) and background (think and know) conversations that surround them. What is sustainable to one is not necessarily sustainable to another. Therefore, conversations among persons are needed to arrive at more than acceptance of the importance of sustainability. It is imperative that people arrive at agreement for the significance of sustainability today.

**2. Groups of people matter** – and in coming together in collaborative ways people can share what they know, how they go about what they do, and what is needed to ensure sustainability. All stakeholders have to identify and ensure accountability for their sustainable contributions. When groups of people shrug their shoulders at their contribution they lessen the opportunities for those who take their place.

**3. Organic processes have to be evident** – and these processes, through which sustainability data-information-knowledge flow, have to be transparent, inclusive, and accountable. This flow means people, as individuals and in groups, have to recognize that shift happens. Therefore, organization strategies, structures, and relationships must be linked and cultivated on previous and ongoing sustainability initiatives.

**4. Practical ethics are essential in dealings** – and all sustainable connections between people must be creditable, fair, and caring. As people work with one another their interactions, and the service and products they create, must ethically benefit in the short term. And those same interactions, services, and products must be ethically reviewed to develop the sustainable processes needed to facilitate long-term transitions.

**5. Exemplary vision is necessary** – and a shared vision on sustainability expressed in governmental policy, institution work, and individual learning is necessary for sustainable transitions. This vision 'from sustainability' has to be shared in ways that people enrol themselves in its achievement. At its foundation the sustainability messages have to be educated in such a way that people say they thought of it themselves and are willing to show others so continual improvement is possible.

**6. Generative learning to knowing is essential** – and collaborative dialogues are key elements of problem solving and appreciative inquiry. In shifting learning to knowing based on solutions required and doing more of what works encourages persons to generate potential, practical, and presentational knowledge that benefits themselves and others. By sharing knowledge the sustainability vision is actualized and ethics are lived.

**7. Walking the shared path makes it visible** – and everyone's attention to sharing knowledge and wisdom moves tacit knowledge into the realm of explicit knowledge. Once knowledge is shared openly, systems may be developed, implemented, and evaluated that allow others to follow in due course. Knowing from whence people came makes a path worn for those to follow. With a known path, resources will not be assigned to reinventing 'things.' Instead, those resources can be applied to making things even better.

**8. Co-creation continues cultural transition** – and sustainable development does not follow the traditional ways of doing things because of what has worked before will not meet the needs of the future. Also, persons, organizations, and societies that worked alone have to act responsibly and think generatively across all industrial and voluntary sectors, and across all generations and around the world. A culture of sustainability woven into societal fabric encourages all world citizens to co-create something more than what they have now without impacting what will be left for those who follow.

**9. Equilibrating paradox is the present of the present** – and in paradoxes such as right and wrong, sadness and happiness, masculine and feminine, yin and yang, more and less, birth and death, the evident truth becomes – when you have one, the other is also present. This truth means living in dynamic balance is the sustainability test – using less, creating more. It means the present time and space in which a leader influences others is their gift, just as a leader's gift to influence others is their time and space.

These thoughts are wide-ranging and linked to the extent that you cannot have one without the other. They provide leaders with nine insights to share as they view and review what happened, what is happening, and what is likely to happen.

In summary, sustainability is about the leader's ability to nourish a shared meaning of persons living their great lives while they co-create today's world from tomorrow through fair exchange.

### About the Author

Stephen Hobbs co-creates the *Well-living Workplace*™ with persons, teams, and organizations. His work experience includes entrepreneur, manager in non-profit and public organizations, corporate consultant, trainer and facilitator, university and college instructor, and published author.

