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# //SUSTAINABILITY:

## *The Only Option*

BY ANTHONY ZOLEZZI

// Many businesses struggle to implement sustainable and eco-friendly practices in their already-successful organizations. When asked how to integrate sustainability programs, I process how to ensure the company goes down the path of sustainability, while also making sure management doesn't become overwhelmed with the process. I think it's impossible to be a successful company long-term without being a sustainable business by definition and practice.

Now, let's talk about what makes a successful business.

There are multiple key metrics for determining what constitutes a thriving business, but for the sake of argument, I am going to lay out what I believe most people would say. One of the first things you need is a unique value proposition.

A good example is a product that does something better than any other product on the market, and that most people are utilizing, like a smartphone versus a tired landline phone. Perhaps your company has a business model that can redefine an entire industry like organic food did for agriculture, Uber did for personal transportation, and Salesforce did for customer relationship management.

After determining a value proposition that is unique and differentiated, you'll need willing customers who care about what you are doing and will pay enough that your company earns a profit after covering expenses and paying wages.

At a bare minimum, a successful organization needs at least those two components to operate. As the business grows, upper management will require additional resources, whether they be people, raw materials, or both in order to continue to provide the service or product. This will require two additional components: environment and raw materials. You must have the right environment for employees to work comfortably, preferably a space that is very welcoming and conducive to a work environment. Raw materials used for products are critical, and at the same time, companies must work diligently on supply chain. I have seen some of the greatest products crippled

during scale up because the supply chain did not have enough materials or production capacity, or in a service-based business, inadequate employee training to deliver those services.

Once you have established your value proposition, customers, and resources, you must secure systems and procedures to ensure operations run smoothly and consistently. All of this is going to take fantastic people, so I would suggest separating "people" as its own category because as the business grows, hiring and training will become another critical factor to organizational success. Do we agree that this is a decent basic framework for a successful business? Then let's move on to the question of how we implement a sustainability initiative.

When people ask me why or how to implement sustainable or eco-friendly practices, my answer always goes back to the definition of sustainability, which is the ability to continue without interruption. Now, let's get a little more granular on the "how." If a business has not implemented sustainable practices within its supply chain, it risks running out of ingredients or increasing prices of the product—this is not an option. Likewise, some industries are subject to questionable labor practices, making the labor unsustainable—something Adidas and other textile companies have learned the hard way. Moreover, the environment you create at your office is critical. I cannot state this vehemently enough. It is vital to have the best people remain throughout your organization, while having a constant flow of new hires in the mix. Again, the reason for my caution—would you ever use toxic paint, toxic lights, or cause excessive stress if you had a sustainability mindset and initiative in place?

I realize most of this information is obvious and you all understand the importance, but what if you have an established business with a 50-year-old culture and a very specific, old-school way of doing things without the luxury of a newer business model? How

do you start? What do you do to get everyone moving in the right direction? Obviously, this scenario is a much more difficult proposition than in newer organizations. However, many case studies have shown that you can move older business models towards sustainability and eco-friendly practices. Ford, Unilever, and Walmart are all great examples of this initiative.

So what do you do? The first step is to broadly commit to sustainability and eco-friendly practices at all levels of the company. If a company is product driven, then one of the first things management can do is examine the entire supply chain for every single raw material in the product line. This

plants. Then, relate those things to energy savings, efficiencies, and positive morale of your employees. Next, extend that to customers and how they use your service as well. Remember, sustainability includes happy and healthy people, as they will encourage other happy and healthy people. I will never forget, after implementing a sustainability program at a Fortune 200 industrial company, when the company's president said to me, "one of the most positive aspects of the sustainability program was the number of new employee applicants that either knew about our sustainability program or asked about the company's sustainability initiatives."

Companies that only implement changes because of cost savings end up being unsustainable themselves.

The only way a company can be successful today is to be a sustainable and eco-friendly leader within their industry or sector. Companies who cannot conform to sustainable and environmentally conducive standards are no longer viable for long-term success.

I want to leave you with a challenge: Think of a significant sustainability initiative for your company. Would you consider the use of clean, nontoxic materials throughout your supply chain, or a warm and engaging physical environment in your office?

Perhaps you would consider the greatest product possible—happy people in your company and many new ones that want to join. This becomes the positive cycle of a successful, sustainable company. [ns](#)

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is usually a great example of how to start thinking about sustainability. Top leaders will find components where they can increase efficiencies and save money; these will all be key actions towards sustainability. The changes will provide working examples to discuss in company meetings. Once top management gets this process started, they should start challenging key managers to look at all of their moving parts.

Reviewing sustainability can help. The Dow Jones Sustainability Index's questionnaire is a great place to start. However, I recommend doing this only after you evaluate your supply chain. Before you get overwhelmed with sustainability at the level of the Dow Jones Index, it's good to see first where it can benefit your company: by saving money or making the supply chain more efficient, which I am confident it will. This will give you the stamina to push the company to the next level.

With service-based businesses, start with all the tentacles of your service and everything they touch. Look at your people and their environment: the light, the air, the walls, and the

My final comment is to make the commitment. Set an example by talking about a key aspect that you found and then let your people shine. If it is an older company, the only thing that will resonate for a while will be the cost savings. Be okay with that and celebrate it, but at the same time, encourage people that bubble up with passion to take on sustainability with different projects. This will typically come from employees that are newer or unique in their own way. They will be the ones moving sustainable actions beyond cost savings. I mentioned earlier that you will need stamina, which becomes important when the initiatives move beyond cost savings. The changes made will take when customers are willing to pay more to maintain your margin because of sustainability initiative implemented. To me, this is the most wonderful aspect of sustainability initiatives. Successful companies push forward and provide sustainability as part of their value proposition, and as a reason to do business with them. The difference here is that successful companies know how to push their value proposition to the next level.

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ANTHONY ZOLEZZI is a serial entrepreneur who plays a leading role in advising corporations on ways to innovate their existing strengths given the expectations of today's environmentally conscious culture, while increasing profitability and uncovering new innovations. His work has resulted in numerous entrepreneurial companies and product developments focused on sustainability and health. // [anthonyzolezzi.com](http://anthonyzolezzi.com)