

Organizational Sustainability: A Case Study at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum

Abstract:

In the modern age, sustainability has proven to be a contentious area of debate. With varying definitions, espousals and applications, the term has generated much dissension, especially in the organizational setting. Sustainability has no doubt become a nebulous and multi-dimensional social construct—which makes its implementation even more difficult. However, with careful management that attends to specific organizational needs and values, sustainability becomes a feasible goal well within reach of those who seek it. By using the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum as a case study in critical communication, this paper illustrates how sustainability is dependent on, and a product of, organizational culture.

Literature Review:

In order to fully understand the potential link between cultural orientation of an organization and its respective pursuit of sustainability, it is first necessary to establish a historical background of sustainability in practice.

The term “sustainability” was originally coined by the forestry industry in the 18th century.¹ In this application, it means never harvesting more than a forest yields in new growth and is grounded in an ecological frame. The concern of preserving resources for the future is no doubt perennial; however, as time went on, curbing consumption would step out of a purely ecological framework. With escalating environmental and social issues, public pressure increased to find ways

¹ Kuhlman, Tom, and John Farrington. "What Is Sustainability?" *Sustainability* 2.11 (2010): 3436-448. *Open Access*. Web.

to foster development that would in turn alleviate social conflict while simultaneously protecting the environment for future generations. This public pressure culminated in 1987 when the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) coined the term “sustainable development”.²In doing so, the WCED, an entity of the United Nations, sought to create a global definition of sustainability that factored in environmental integrity, social equity and economic prosperity. It is this definition that has subsequently created all the various perceptions of corporate sustainability that are being used in the organizational setting writ large.

Long-term sustainability on the organizational level requires a pragmatic approach. Over the last decade, many companies—whether privately owned, non-profit, or university-affiliated—have utilized specific environmental or social managementsystems. However, it has been argued these programs are rarely integrated with the general management structures of these firms.³ This lack of integration is one the primary obstacles to achieving systemic change. Furthermore, few of these companies have established formalized mechanisms that communicate and reinforce sustainable values to clients and staff.⁴ Environmental business strategy suggests that the optimal way to achieve lasting sustainability is to integrate sustainable values into the core business values and strategies of the firm.⁵ However, successfully communicating these integrated values requires a strong consideration of organizational culture.

Having emerged in the 1970’s, concept of organizational culture is relatively new.⁶The concept has been interpreted very differently and there is a lack of consensus regarding a common definition of the term. However, culture theorists

²Linnenluecke, Martina K., and Andrew Griffiths. "Corporate Sustainability and Organizational Culture." *Journal of World Business* 45.4 (2010): 357-66. Print.

³Figge, Frank, Tobias Hahn, Stefan Schaltegger, and Marcus Wagner. "The Sustainability Balanced Scorecard - Linking Sustainability Management to Business Strategy." *Business Strategy and the Environment* 11.5 (2002): 269-84. Print.

⁴Wikström, Per-Arne. "Sustainability and Organizational Activities - Three Approaches." *Sustainable Development* 18.2 (2010): 99-107. Print.

⁵ Johnson, Dana, and Christa Walck. "Certified Success: Integrating Sustainability into Corporate Management Systems." *Journal of Forestry* 6.7 (2004): 32-39. Web.

⁶Linnenluecke, Martina K., and Andrew Griffiths. "Corporate Sustainability and Organizational Culture." *Journal of World Business* 45.4 (2010): 357-66. Print.

have suggested that organizational culture is a combination of shared values, ideologies, beliefs, and shared patterns of meaning and understanding.⁷ Considering this, it is not surprising that culture is cited as the primary reason for failure in implementing organizational change programs—such as sustainability initiatives.⁸ Because of the multi-dimensional nature of organizational culture, it is difficult to prescribe a single course of action to attaining sustainable operations. But it is important to recognize the interrelation of corporate culture and sustainability.

Primary Research:

My position at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum has given me the unique opportunity to view organizational culture from two different perspectives. Working on the grounds crew as well as in the marketing office, I was able to gain an all-encompassing viewpoint of the various operations happening simultaneously. With a foot in each camp, so to speak, it has become apparent to me how the organizational culture of the Arboretum is arranged. Because of the dual-sided insights that I have gained, I contend that there is a cultural divide among Arboretum operations that is potentially holding them back from achieving their optimum level of sustainability.

There is no doubt that the primary focus of the Arboretum is garnering interest in horticultural knowledge through public outreach—a philosophy that is made clear in its mission statement. Abounding with knowledgeable Master Gardeners and highly capable administrators and support staff, the Arboretum exemplifies a world-class public garden. However, the means in which the various staffs achieve this mission varies.

The grounds crew has a direct relation to the environmental aspect of sustainability. Seeing and interacting with the plants every day gives them a strong sense of ecological stewardship and this is the primary frame through which they strive for sustainability. The three different crews I worked with had various initiatives and strategies that worked from this frame. For instance, Paul Sotak

⁷Linnenluecke and Griffiths, 360.

⁸Linnenluecke and Griffiths, 357.

allows Sugar Maple leaves to gather in his hosta garden so he doesn't have to introduce mulch every year; saving time, money and natural resources. Mary Bigelow has worked hard in selecting environmentally appropriate perennials and grasses that require less maintenance. She has also significantly cut her chemical use by using this practice. With similar respect for the environment, Ted Pew is more frugal with his gardening decisions. Ted's primary concern is the almighty dollar, claiming that, "I won't do it if it costs more". But interestingly enough, many of his economic based decisions simultaneously benefit environmental sustainability. Rather than use disposable twist-ties in his vegetable garden, Ted repurposes old t-shirts to make ribbons that he ties his vegetables with again and again. This reduces waste and also cuts cost. These are only a few examples of sustainability in action at the Arboretum.

Finding sustainable solutions that simultaneously address economic, environmental and social concerns isn't always as easy as old t-shirts. Long-term sustainability on the organizational level is surely a complex issue that requires strategic planning. However, the aforementioned integration of sustainability into core business values is a promising way to start. This integration requires solid channels of communication between staff members—a challenge for any firm or institution the size of the Arboretum. But the Arboretum has particularities that perhaps make communicating these values more difficult; namely, the different sub-cultures of the office staff and grounds crew.

Cross-generational communication studies have been conducted at the Arboretum that pose valuable insights to the effectiveness of current systems. According to primary research conducted by Nathan Kells, there are several ways the Arboretum could change their communication networks to increase the efficiency of information diffusion from supervisors to employees.⁹ Based on the research, most employees prefer to receive Emails or online communications when receiving information about job policies and procedures or changes to job policies and procedures. Currently, this information is being disseminated in the form of

⁹ Kells, Nathan. *Cross-Generational Communications in the Workplace*. University of Minnesota, (2013) Web.

face-to-face communication which is not the preferred mode.¹⁰ Additional structural components that potentially inhibit the flow of information are related to the available forms communication technology. Currently, there are only two computers that are available to the 50 grounds crew employees.¹¹ Additionally, these employees feel that efficiency could increase by updating the current channels of communication through technology such as iPads and better WiFi.¹²

Recommendations:

My literary research and first-person experience at the Arboretum have led me to believe there are several ways in which they could achieve lasting sustainability that is permeated throughout the organizational culture. Although there are many strategies that could be employed, I will remain focused on implements that address issues and standards of communication.

Because the office staff and grounds crew are working to uphold the same mission statement, they need to have a comprehensive and universal understanding of sustainability if they wish to bridge the gap between their differing organizational cultures. This process should begin by starting a dialogue to establish a mutually agreed upon mission that incorporates sustainable business, social and environmental values. This dialogue, whether formal or informal, will need to consider the preferences of employees and limitations posed by current communication systems. Making communication networks and channels more available to the grounds crew employees will resolve many of the current communication issues while simultaneously providing the office staff with more hands-on insight of sustainable practices.

Conclusion:

As stated earlier, there is no single path towards sustainability. We must be flexible and mindful in our pursuit. Integrated systems that successfully address the

¹⁰Kells, *Cross Generational*

¹¹Kells, *Cross Generational*

¹² Kells, *Cross-Generational*

three pillars of sustainability (economic, environmental and social) are entirely achievable but require dedicated and strategic planning. The Minnesota Landscape Arboretum has many programs and initiatives directed at ecological sustainability. However, by utilizing a comprehensive and management-integrated approach that incorporates social, economic and environmental dimensions, the Arboretum could enhance their sustainability directives and work towards long-term sustainable development.