

Articles

Sustainability is Survivability 'The Way of the Future'

Project management as a relatively new discipline has had to survive assorted barriers to acceptance.

Recently though a new challenge has arisen for project managers. There is a new 'kid on the block' who has to be mastered. A new set of understandings that the smart project manager will need to embrace if he wants to remain relevant and in demand. A new opportunity to add value.

Sustainability.

The catch cry of the 21st century. Finally!

One would have to be living under a coal fired power station to not be aware there is a change, a shift, in the way we are looking at our business.

The whole climate change experience is there in front of us and if we don't consider it as part of our armoury we will be left behind by those that are.

Sustainability is about doing more for less. It is about adding value. It is about improving efficiencies.

It is not about tree hugging!

The most well known description of sustainability is found in the 1987 Brundtland Report commissioned by the United Nations. It defines sustainability as "**development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs**"

I describe it as follows:

Profit plus environment = sustainability.

The win/win opportunity.

Yet many executives and project managers consider sustainability a fringe concept.

Scepticism is still rife.

Business decision makers are naturally concerned about costs and most of them are still understandably ensconced in the belief that sustainability is going to cost them money.

What is the rate of return? How much will it cost me? Certainly valid questions. "No business will survive if it wastes money." World Business Council of Sustainable Development. (WBCSD, 2003)

Yet if they don't embrace sustainability they will be left behind. They will be wasting money.

Sustainability provides the commercial advantage. Compelling evidence from around the world confirms it is cost effective. The sustainable company will be more profitable and more in demand compared to the company that is not.

This applies to all industry, commerce and facilities. It will provide your business the point of difference; the commercial advantage.

Let us briefly examine the cost of our diminishing and irreplaceable Natural Capital. How much longer can we pay \$2.50 for a litre of water to drink at the shop yet only pay 30 cents for a full bath? Subsidised electrical coal fired power is between 6 cents and 14 cents a Kilowatt hour. Having an 80 litre shower costs 12 cents in power and 7.8 cents in water! Remember each kilowatt/hour of electricity creates 0.97 kilogramme of CO₂. Subsidies breed inefficiency and encourage waste.

The supply and demand capital market in charge of dwindling undervalued resources in conjunction with the government through legislation will both force change in the immediate future. It is an imperative. Water and electricity costs, carbon credits, emissions trading, water credits and trading. The cost of currently undervalued Natural Capital is going up. Soon! Business and our community is going to see that sustainability is the way of the future.

If they don't they will be left behind.

This where project management steps in. This is the project manager's opportunity to add value through knowledge, skill and focus.

If you as a project manager are not up to speed with sustainable practice will you be left behind as well?

Part of being a professional requires you to provide your clients with the commercial advantage.

What will you do if your client demands a sustainable outcome for their operations from project inception?

What will you do when you see that your client is promoting an inefficient, unsustainable process? If you understand some sustainable concepts or are at least aware of who can add value through sustainability then you are delivering to your client much more benefit than the project manager who isn't.

For example, what do you do if you have a client who is constructing a new Health Care facility and doesn't have a sustainability consultant involved? As an effective project manager you will be strident in recommending to him that a sustainability consultant will offer major benefit. That doesn't mean you understand what the consultant knows or the detail of what they do. It is not the project manager's job to know everything. What it does mean is that you have shown your client and your team your awareness of the changing world. You can empower them to achieve great benefit from your understanding of sustainability and its benefit to their business.

Sustainability is about adding value. It will not be accepted if it doesn't. The in demand project manager must also add value.

The WBCSD said in 2003 "no business will survive if it is inefficient."

The evidence regarding climate change and its cost to our community, to business or to the environment is more and more compelling every day.

Clients are already asking what do we do, how do we do it .We want to become sustainable .You are our project manager, what do you think?

The single most important thing for a project manager to be effective is to believe in what he does. If you are working on a project that you believe in then the project has a much greater chance of success. That doesn't mean you have to understand it but it does mean you have to believe in it. To promote sustainability you must at least believe in its benefits. If not you can't seriously promote it.

Many clients are going to be demanding sustainable outcomes without knowing how to get them. Surely this is a great opportunity for the project management industry to embrace sustainability as a core component of their operational protocols.

All it takes is a change in attitude, a slight shift in policy thinking, helped along by the aware project manager.

By the time this article is in print Rupert Murdoch will have announced News Ltd's operations are going to embrace sustainability.

Look at the benefits Wal-Mart in America has achieved from adopting a sustainable approach.

The upcoming Federal election appears that is it going to be fought over the sustainability issue.

More and more mainstream businesses are waking up daily and realising they will be left behind if they don't understand and embrace sustainability.

Yet this awareness has only happened over the last 6 months. Climate change has been talked about for over twenty years in the scientific community, castigated as fringe nonsense. The Stern Review released in November, 2006, was the first climate change report to thoroughly analyse the economic cost to the planet of climate change .That was, I believe, the tipping point.

If in doubt read the four page executive summary.

Since then assorted scientific reports and reviews have all agreed that this is an issue more important to the world than terrorism. It doesn't look like going away in a hurry.

But do we really agree? Do we really care? Do we truly understand sustainability and its benefits including the value adding opportunity?

Even if we don't agree with the climate change subject is there not logic in just reviewing our operations, our designs, our processes, our philosophies to reduce waste and improve efficiencies? Surely that in itself is a reason to reconsider our attitude to sustainability!

Sustainability encourages innovation, efficiency and practicality. It will only be embraced if it is cost effective.

Sustainability is adding value. It is not about installing a water tank or recycling office paper. It is about a new philosophy. It is a new way of analysing, about thinking proactively. It is about adding value for your clients and for your community throughout the overall project lifecycle.

It is the way of the future.

Can you afford to be left behind?

The US Green Building Council (USGBC) (Cost of Green Buildings 2004) has done significant research on this issue and has found that if there is any cost up front for a sustainable building it is usually around .6% -2% of total project cost. Sometimes there is no increased construction cost.

It has also identified that these costs are usually recoverable 10 times over within 20 years just through reduced energy useage.

Yet there is much more benefit to be found in defining a sustainable outcome from your business. This applies to new or refurbished built projects.

The earlier in a project you identify a sustainable outcome requirement, the greater these outcomes will be.

When deciding to take a sustainable approach, many options and benefits arise.

The design of your structure becomes suited to the local climate; the occupant comfortability is significantly improved, resulting in reduced absenteeism (25%, USGBC) of staff while increasing productivity.

Internal environment quality is greatly improved; resulting in improved occupant and staff health .The EPA (USA) has identified 'Sick Building Syndrome' as one of the top 5 health issues facing the world today!

A sustainable approach will significantly reduce that risk.

There is no need to be fearful of a sustainable approach. It is the way of the future.

It will measurably increase your profit while improving your environmental outcomes. These two features have for years been considered mutually exclusive. Sustainability changes all that.

Profit + Environment = Sustainability