

8.4: Conclusion

We have presented an enormous amount of information throughout this book that may appear overwhelming. At this point you are probably wondering where to begin. First, keep in mind that there is no easy one-step approach to becoming sustainable; sustainability is a *continuous* process that requires critical self-analysis, honesty, innovation, and risk. That is, before beginning this journey toward sustainability, a business should be prepared to be self-reflective, critical, and honest about all its operations and associated impacts, and a business should be ready to take risks and be innovative, moving beyond its comfort zone, or business as usual.

Second, consider that sustainability encompasses the operations of the entire business: every process, every activity, and every function. A business will not be able to implement one or a few changes and proclaim that the business has achieved sustainability. A business should be prepared to apply the aforementioned critical self-analysis, honesty, innovation, and risk across all processes, all activities, and every function of the business. Sustainability is a company-wide change in mindset, philosophy, views, and practices related to how the business operates.

Lastly, realize that sustainability incorporates a triple bottom line in evaluating company performance: the environmental, social, and economic impact of the business (also referred to as planet, people, and profit). Since pursuit of this triple bottom line is central to sustainability, our discussion on this point bears repeating.

The efforts that a business makes to reduce its environmental impact are equated with the term going green. Since green modifications can often be translated into financial terms (cost, return on investment, savings), this is often the first step a business will pursue in beginning the sustainability journey. Among some of the commonly implemented activities here are creating company “green teams” to explore and champion ways to become more environmentally friendly, recycling and reducing waste, using recycled products, changing to compact fluorescent lightbulbs and retrofitting other lighting, implementing energy-saving activities, pursuing LEED certification, and implementing ISO 14001 standards.

The efforts that a business makes to increase its social impact often refer to the impact of company policies, procedures, practices, and operations on employees, on those employed by its suppliers, and on communities, cultures, and society. A business should critically evaluate the impact of its own practices and policies on employees. A business should also demand transparency from suppliers to understand where all supplies were generated and the conditions under which they were produced. Common activities of a sustainable business include the use of Fair Trade products (such as coffee in the break room), avoidance of products that may have been made with child or forced labor, contributions to solving social problems, implementation of SA 8000 standards, providing fair and safe working conditions, living wages, insurance and other benefits, and a offering employees a work–life balance.

The efforts that a business makes to maximize its economic impact often refer to the economic impact the business has on communities or societies within which it operates. This does not refer to the “profit” the company shows on financial statements but rather refers to how the community or society “profits” from the presence of the business, which, in turn, will result in continued profitability for the company. That is, economic impact refers to the continued prosperity of the business due to the economic benefit it provides to the community or society. Common activities include the payment of fair and living wages, providing positive impacts on the local economy and on local economic development (job creation, tax dollars, property values), and assessing the stress or relief created for local public service systems as a result of the business’s operations.

So how can your business become a sustainable business? To begin your journey, we recommend that you pick one thing, one process, one activity, or one department. Be prepared to apply critical self-analysis and be honest in identifying the associated environmental, social, and economic impact of current business practices, processes, and operations. Begin by measuring the current impact, set goals and timelines for improvement, and then track and measure those improvements and results. Do not be afraid to experiment and learn what other companies are doing. Involve and listen to employees, suppliers, customers, and others, including critics.

As your company begins its sustainability journey, remember that changes will impact operations company-wide. Therefore, sustainability education is important for employees, suppliers, and customers alike, as is communication of progress toward sustainability goals. It is also important not to overstate claims or accomplishments (referred to as greenwashing). Yet another word of caution is to remember that sustainability is three-dimensional. While the concept of green is becoming mainstream, sustainability requires that you not overlook the other areas of impact (social and economic impacts). As a company begins to build a track record of changes and successes, continue bringing more processes, activities, and departments into the fold until the entire

organization is focused on the triple bottom line of sustainability. Above all, remember that as a company pursues sustainability, there is no end to this journey; it is a continuous process and refinement of the way we view business within the context of society. Refer to [Note 9.6 "How to Begin the Journey Toward Sustainability"](#) for additional tips.

We return to our definition introduced at the beginning of the book: a sustainable business is *one that operates in the interest of all current and future stakeholders in a manner that ensures the long-term health and survival of the business and its associated economic, social, and environmental systems*. Sustainability requires a new view of business and a new philosophy on how business should be conducted. Armed with this new perspective, we believe that business can become a vehicle for positive change.

How to Begin the Journey Toward Sustainability

1. Educate, inform, and engage stakeholders.
2. Pick one thing (one process, one activity, or one department).
3. Identify and measure its associated environmental, social, and economic impact as a result of current business practices, processes, and operations.
4. Engage stakeholders in identifying areas for improvement, creating measurable goals, and setting timelines for achievement.
5. Assign specific tasks and responsibilities.
6. Track, measure, and document results.
7. Refine and adjust as needed.
8. Communicate progress.
9. Expand efforts to other processes, activities, and departments (and repeat the previous steps).
10. Share your knowledge; mentor others.

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