

# The Journey to Sustainability

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By Lillian Rudacille

Over the last decade the word sustainability has become a buzz-word in the dialog of pop culture. *Sustainable* is now used to describe everything from economy and agriculture to construction and everything in between. Frequent use of the word allows its definition to be tailored to whatever subject is at hand. It is most simply defined as the ability of the current generation to thrive utilizing social, environmental, and economic resources without sacrificing future generations' ability to do the same. At the end of the day, sustainability is not a new concept. In fact, the concept has been around thousands of years in almost every culture. A commonly referenced Native American Proverb states:

*We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.*

A prominent Jewish parable found in the Midrash tells a story about how a man was walking down the road when he came upon a very curious site in the clearing ahead of him. There was a very old man, well in his last days on earth, working feverishly to plant a fig tree. Intrigued by what he saw he asked, "Old Man, do you truly expect to live long enough to consume the fruits of your labor?" The old man *replied*, "*I was born into a world flourishing with ready pleasures. My ancestors planted for me, and I now plant for my children so they may do the same...*"

Both these stories share a common theme illustrating how along the path of life one must live in such a way to allow future generations the same luxury; thus making sustainability a journey rather than a destination.

The journey to sustainability always has a starting point. That starting point can be marked by any number of things. Sometimes it is triggered by simply reading an article or hearing a presentation that stirs a sense of moral responsibility. Or, it may start as a reaction to a negative practice receiving bad press. Nike's journey began this way.

During the 90's the Nike Corporation was publicly exposed for having poor labor conditions in its contract factories overseas. It was soon realized that a proactive approach to responsibility, which engaged stakeholders was going to be necessary if they were to redevelop their image. This was the first of many corporate paradigm shifts that led to Nike's successful path to sustainability.

Some of their accomplishments to date include petrochemical solvent reduction, shoebox design reconfiguration, the Reuse-A-Shoe program, and the launching of their

Considered line ("The Natural Step,"). Each of these accomplishments made huge strides environmentally towards sustainability, but also, made enormous impacts financially for the company. The reduction of petrochemical solvents by 95% in 1993 not only reduced environmental impact it also saved the company \$4.5 million that year. The shoebox configuration was redesigned resulting in less raw material fiber use and a savings of \$1.6 million a year.

Nike reached out to its employees for ideas on how to continue on this path. The Reuse-A-Shoe program was born. The program grinds up old shoes and uses the recycled material to make everything from athletic tracks to playgrounds, preventing unwanted shoes from going into the landfill.(Mackrael) Nike then, challenged the design team to design and create a product line that's production process and end product respected the environment. With the launch of the Considered line, the "Green" Nike was born. What started out as a marketing campaign to repair their public image turned into a lucrative paradigm shift resulting in a "triple bottom line".

When Nike started on this journey to sustainability they had no idea where it would lead them, only that a change in the company's image must be made. What they have found is remarkable from the standpoint of the stakeholder to the stockholder. No one can disagree that the corporate paradigm shifts that Nike has made and continues to make, support the environment as well as the profit margin. Mark Parker, the CEO of Nike INC. stated, "Corporate responsibility must evolve from being seen as an unwanted cost to being recognized as an intrinsic part of a healthy business model, an investment that creates competitive advantages and helps a company achieve profitable, sustainable growth." (Parker, as cited in the Nike Story)

Nike is not the only company to realize that sustainability is not only morally responsible, but fiscally stimulating; the list goes on and on. This realization has led to the coining of the term "triple bottom line". The triple bottom line is an accounting framework associated with People, Planet, and Profit. Commonly referenced by business analyst, it appears in financial statements as well as Sustainability and Social Responsibility reports alike. Achieving a triple bottom line starts with identifying a baseline and defining best practices to meet sustainability goals.

Most companies and even small businesses already have some sustainability best practices in place without even knowing it. While for others, already well on their journey to sustainability, there is much unidentified low hanging fruit. Finding that baseline is often thought daunting. Many would ask, where do we start? The answer is much simpler than you may have thought. You start with your most valuable resource, your human capital. When looking for a great place to eat in a new city, you ask the locals. The same holds true in business. Nike's Reuse-A-Shoe program is a prime example of using this resource. This information you seek, is all around you it just needs to be harnessed so you can start plotting your path on the journey to sustainability.

How do you make finding that baseline less daunting, accurately measure company performance and drive the right change to begin your journey to sustainability?

Just Ask! Your employees are eager to help and you may be ignoring the best business intelligence available. There is a methodology that allows you to evaluate your company by performing a self-assessment of either the entire operation or a very specific portion of it. These self-assessments determine how well, or poorly, your company is doing on the journey to sustainability with regard to your established processes, procedures, and policies. All of the scores in the assessment help to relate how close the scored entities (entire company, departments, functions etc.) are to the ideal; which is the sustainability best practices. This online methodology allows you to self-assess sustainability performance, procedures, and policies and then it helps you measure their adoption rate. It also allows you to monitor progress throughout the year; and share knowledge across departments, titles, and functions. In addition, this application sets the stage for continuous improvement. It allows you to compare departments, facilities, or divisions of the company in real time 24/7 year after year to allow managers at all levels to continuously monitor and manage their operations while producing positive financial impacts for the company.

As we start the New Year I challenge you to look within to see how your company, small business, or organization can align people, planet, and profit to grow wealth and prosperity for your stakeholders as well as your stockholders.

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