After too long spent at my desk in the past couple of months, I decided to venture out to see what a small but illustrious group of senior sustainability professionals had to say on the topic of managing and measuring their sustainability impact. As is usual with a gathering of sustainability professionals the tone was friendly, open and above all, optimistic.

The 'magic' of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

What was clear from the two days was that the SDGs have taken root in the hearts, minds and strategies of all the organizations who presented over the two days. The value of the SDGs lies, not in the detailed KPIs which sit behind them, but in the positive narrative of transformation that they provide. They communicate a common vision of the future we are working towards within which every organization can locate their individual contribution. They are helping companies to think about the scale and ambition of their contribution within the context of the overall challenges. They also provide a landscape of 'innovation platforms' from which companies can choose to build their innovation agendas with a sustainability goal in mind.

Impact: Inside out as well as outside in

The summit's moderator, Ralph Thurm, kicked off with a useful graphic talking about what impact actually is. At the micro level, we need to consider impact on and of *human behaviour* as well as on and of *corporations*. How can we have an impact on individuals' willingness to act, and the leadership qualities that those individuals display? How do underlying changes in human behaviour themselves impact the SDGs? At the more macro level we need to think about whether the systems conditions prevent, allow or require sustainable behaviour – and how these systems themselves can be impacted.
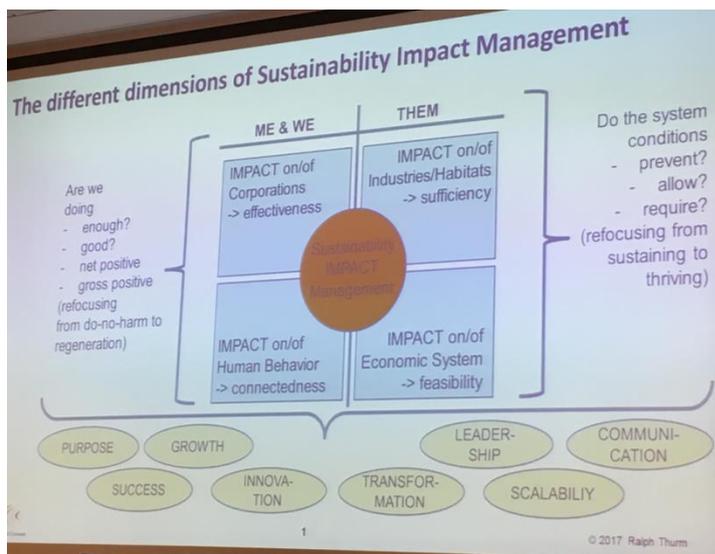
Companies, who have in the past thought primarily about their impact on the world outside (inside out) are now also focusing on what the outside world expects of them and what role their activities can play in shaping the future development of that outside world (outside in). (for example Siemens and Phillips, who presented here). They have realised that in order to

work out whether they are *doing enough*, companies need to ask themselves *towards what?* Context and materiality have come to the fore.

Purpose and trust

We heard how this understanding of context and materiality has helped companies evolve their strategies with respect to sustainability along a continuum from 'doing less bad' to 'net positive' or even 'gross positive'. A clear purpose situated within the broader issue context and supported by leaders, can deliver successful value creation. It has also been found to be a critical driver of trust in a corporation (Globescan Radar 2016). Purpose is brought to life within the organization through its values – they articulate what being part of a company / tribe is all about. Bjorn Haughland from DNV went as far as to present a slide entitled "a values based culture eats strategy for breakfast, lunch and dinner." Christophe Fauconnier of Innate Motion defined purpose as "a meaningful opportunity to contribute" and showcased the work his agency do (e.g. with Unilever brands) to encourage companies to design for contribution and engender a 'giver' mindset.

Partnerships and collaboration: "Progress is more and more about collaboration"

However, presenters argued that to move purpose via success to scale requires collaboration and advocacy. GlobeScan presented data showing that sustainability leaders see their companies' contribution to the SDGs primarily being though innovation (developing product/ services to provide solutions in line with the SDGs) and partnerships which support the delivery of programmes. The 17th SDG itself is "Partnership for the Goals" and partnerships and collaborations are increasingly seen by sustainability leaders as contributing significantly to the SDGs (GlobeScan Sustainability Leaders Survey 2016).

Partnership success factors

But what do we know about making these partnerships work? Andre Veneman of Akzo Nobel believes that their unique capabilities in managing public private partnerships "deliver competitive advantage." When I asked what these capabilities were, he highlighted:

- Managing both on short term and long term horizons
- Working on true win-win-win solutions
- The ability to take the ego out of it
- Being open to sharing benefits

Within my own research I have found that a *good understanding of the end and means* of the partnership from both sides is an important factor, and Bill Baue of Reporting 3.0 drew on Daly's Triangle of means and ends[1] to explore this. It is important to be clear about the common goals of a partnership, as well as the value each party expects to contribute and get out of the relationship, particularly if the partners come from difference sectors with big differences in the way they see the world.

Matthew Yeomans of Sustainly argued that not *using the right language* can be a problem, showing examples of the gulf between sustainability experts talk about sustainability compared to people in their everyday lives.

---

[1] Donella Meadows (1998) 'Indicators and information systems for sustainable development,' The Sustainability Institute, Hartland, p. 42

HOW SUSTAINABILITY EXPERTS TALK
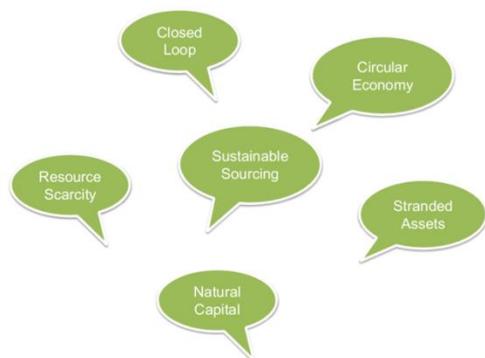
WHAT THE PUBLIC CARES ABOUT
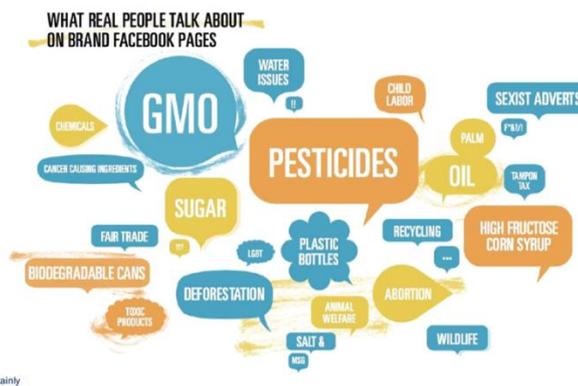
Presenter: Matthew Yeomans, Sustainly

In my research I have found that good partnerships often rely on individuals playing the role of an intermediary or 'bridge builder' between the organizations. These individuals may belong to one of the companies, or another person or organization specifically employed to play this role within the partnership. Bill Baue referred to these individuals as 'positive mavericks' who can:

- Work productively (not obstructively) towards positive change
- Are motivated more by ultimate ends, with intermediate ends and means serving as vehicles, not destinations
- Challenge the constraints, structural limitations, unconscious bias and shadow agendas of the institutions and organizations they work with
- Backcast from a desired future, building bridge foundations on the far side of the river
- Work collaboratively in ne(x)tworks with other positive mavericks
- Think and act at systems levels
- Seek transformative (not just incremental) change

Bill also shared some work by Donella Meadows (1999)[2] which argues that the most effective way to change a system is through changing its goals and – even more importantly – the underlying mindsets / paradigms underlying those goals. So it becomes even more important that we can build our capability to be conscious of these mindsets.

Harnessing difference

These insights relating to value frames or mindsets resonates with some recent research we did at Cranfield[3]. Based on a review of the relevant academic literature, we suggest that, when engaging with external stakeholders in pursuit of environmental innovation, companies should recognise that competing value frames, or 'ways of seeing the world' represent a challenge but also an opportunity.

These competing value frames may exist between those leading environmental innovation and their external stakeholders but also between various internal functions.

Therefore, as well as developing skills in managing stakeholder engagements, companies need to develop capabilities which help harness these differences between value frames and use them to reframe problems, combine competencies in new ways, and co-create

---

[2] Donella Meadows (1999) Leverage Points: Places to intervene in a System, The Sustainability Institute, Hartland

[3] Watson, R., Wilson, H.N., Smart, P. and Macdonald. E.K (2017) 'Harnessing Difference: A capabilities based framework for stakeholder engagement in environmental innovation' Journal of Product Innovation Management (Accepted for publication)

innovative solutions. These capabilities includes being able to think systemically, empathize with your stakeholders and hybridize your respective value frames.

In addition, internal structures and processes can help an organization 'learn to learn' from their stakeholders, if they are designed to support the accumulation and sharing of learning from stakeholder engagement. This will help deliver ongoing evolution in what is known across the organization about how best to engage stakeholders.

Partnership for the goals: more research needed!

I came away with a clear feeling that our research on partnerships for environmental impact is relevant and needed by current practitioners. "Partnership for the goals" is an important central pillar of the SDGs but articulating and teaching how to run these successfully remains a significant task and research opportunity.

Rosina Watson is a PhD Researcher into Partnerships for Sustainability Innovation at Cranfield School of Management

For more information about Cranfield's Masters in Management and Corporate Sustainability go to:

https://www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/masters-courses/management-and-corporate-sustainability