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» Is sustainability at the heart of the Olympics?

For the last three summers, I have stood in the Bird's Nest stadium in Beijing with Cranfield MBAs during our International Business Experience in China and watched the obvious pride of Chinese tourists as they visit the main stadium of the 2008 Olympics that signalled China's re-emergence on the world stage.

In contrast, London has staked its pride on making the 2012 Olympics 'the most sustainable Games ever' - transforming the East London Olympic Park site and its surrounding communities into the biggest regeneration project in Europe. →

The London 2012 ‘sustainability journey’ is both inspirational and helpful for busy managers working to embed sustainability in their own organisations.

Embedding sustainability in strategic planning

The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) has developed a five-point plan to achieve its sustainability ambitions:

1. Climate Change - reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.
2. Waste - reducing total waste and encouraging recycling during construction as well as during the Games.
3. Biodiversity - minimising the impact of the Games on local flora and fauna.
4. Inclusion - access for locals to the Games as well as work, training and business opportunities.
5. Healthy living - inspiring people across the country to take up sport and develop active, healthy and sustainable lifestyles.

Like any other organisation making a serious commitment to sustainability, LOCOG and its partners responsible for delivering the Games, have built sustainability into their core strategy. They have scoped their material, environmental, economic and social impacts, prioritising these so as to minimise the negative and maximise the positive. The Doughty Centre’s forthcoming ‘how to guide’, to be published this summer, will provide guidance on this topic.

Performance measurement and feedback

In addition to setting ambitious sustainability goals, LOCOG has been instrumental in developing the means to manage and measure progress against them. In 2007, the independent ‘Commission for a Sustainable London 2012’ (CSL) was established to monitor and support the commitment to a sustainable Olympics and ensure its legacy. The Commission was made up of experts in different aspects of sustainability such as diversity, housing, air quality and supply chain management. Recent Doughty Centre research into the governance of sustainability and corporate responsibility has found that using external expert groups, a growing practice in large companies, can provide a useful reality check to busy boards and senior management teams.

Quality assurance

The London 2012 journey has instigated the British Standard 8901, which has been developed specifically for the events industry to operate in a more sustainable manner.

LOCOG has also collaborated with the Global Reporting Initiative on creation of an internationally recognised framework for sustainability reporting by event organisations.

Communication

Both LOCOG and CSL have produced annual progress reports, supplemented with blogs, YouTube videos and other social media to publicise information.

Innovation in the supply chain

As many big companies have found, making public commitments and setting ambitious targets has spurred innovation throughout the LOCOG supply chain. David Stubbs, head of sustainability at LOCOG, said: “If you make sustainable innovation an important part of how you procure your contractors and designers, and you put it in the brief, people will come up with solutions.”

Knowledge sharing

LOCOG has encouraged their suppliers to share their sustainability learning. Some of the contractors have used this knowledge to win further work across the world.

Encouraging supplier knowledge exchanges around sustainability is becoming good practice amongst sustainability leaders.

LOCOG and the Olympic Development Authority (ODA) have also committed to a ‘legacy for learning’ programme, in a bid to maintain and replicate the high standards set by the London 2012 project. So far, the failings of Athens 2004 (worker fatalities) and Beijing (large numbers of people moved to accommodate the Olympic facilities) have not been repeated.

Progress against targets has been impressive: 2 million tonnes of contaminated soil cleaned on site; zero waste to landfill; 100% sustainable timber (e.g. the Velodrome track is sustainable Siberian pine); and the creation of the largest urban parkland in Europe for more than 150 years. As Olympics sustainability ambassador Jonathan Porritt notes: “London and the UK will be on show to billions of people during the Games and this is a precious ‘once in a lifetime’ opportunity to visibly display our leadership in sustainability issues.”

However, areas of concern remain, particularly over transport congestion and transport-generated pollution. It is also unclear whether the Games will create the desired, long-term behaviour shifts towards healthier and more active life-styles across the UK that are part of its sustainability remit. There was also criticism of the decision to award the wrap-around for the main Olympic Stadium to Dow Chemical due to its ownership of Union Carbide, a company that, several years prior to its acquisition, operated the Bhopal Plant where a major 1984 gas leak disaster in India killed several thousand people. Generally, however, sponsors appear to be helping to reinforce the sustainability message of London 2012.

While the sustainability journey is still underway, it is anticipated that when the Olympic and Paralympic Games conclude on 9 September, London 2012 will have helped to raise global awareness of how to embed sustainability. What are the key takeaways for managers responsible for managing sustainability in their organisations?

- Make sustainability core to your strategy
- Scope your material, environmental, social and economic impacts
- Set clear targets and accountabilities
- Establish effective oversight of commitments
- Measure and report regularly on progress
- Engage and encourage innovation in your value-chain
- Embrace transparency.

When the diverse group of London school children who formed the centrepiece of the successful 2012 bid team approach their forties in 2032, it is hoped they will be able to look back and see how London has encouraged Rio and each succeeding Olympic host city after that, to raise the sustainability bar still further. For them, sustainable development is not an optional extra but is essential to their future – and ours. [\[MF\]](#)

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Sebastian Coe, Chair
London Organising Committee of the
Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG)

“Sustainability is a key part of London 2012 and we’re looking forward to a truly sustainable Games. From construction to how we will stage the Games, we’re constantly looking at ways to ensure we’re setting new standards in how major events are staged.”