

## **Empathy, communication and collaboration are critical to sustainability innovation**

### ***Report on the 3M / BITC Conference: Innovating for sustainable future and business success, 3M Centre, Bracknell, 22 April 2015***

As part of Responsible Business Week, 3M hosted, in partnership with BITC (Business in the Community) a conference to explore how companies can integrate social and environmental thinking into corporate strategies and processes.

The conference was held at 3M's headquarters in Bracknell so we also got a chance to explore 3M products and their innovation stories at their innovation centre (including the now famous Post-It note!).

The conference saw sustainability and innovation professionals, and a handful of academics, come together to hear an excellent introductory discussion on the main stage (including Ian Ellison of Jaguar Land Rover, Wynne Lewis of 3M, and Daniel Teichmann and Samuel Etherington, Founder / CEOs of Hydrogenious Technologies and Aqua Power, two renewable energy start-ups).

Sally Uren of Forum for the Future, summed up this session well with an INNOVATION mnemonic:

- I - Invention plus (merging soft and hard skills)
- N - Nurture culture of collaboration
- N - New collaboration
- O - OK to fail
- V - Value creation (not just financial, but social & environmental)
- A - A mindset of innovation
- T - Target material issues
- I - I can do it
- O - Open innovation (outside in)
- N - Networks (coaches, tech experts, networks that allows scaling)

See also BITC's own blog of the event:

<http://www.bitc.org.uk/news-events/events/rbweek-conference-innovating-sustainable-future-and-business-success>

## **Empathy, communication and collaboration**

Most exciting for me was to hear Ian Ellison (of Jaguar Landrover) talking about the importance of **empathy, communication, collaboration** in making sustainability innovation happen. He said that **understanding the prejudices, mindsets, and thought worlds** of what different groups collaborating on a project was just as important, if not more important than technical innovation skills.

This is the key theme of my own PhD research: this is a capability which I term 'value framing.'

We then participated in a series of themed workshops – my main interest was to join sessions exploring how organizations collaborate with external stakeholders, and particularly whether this also involves a conscious effort to understand and empathize with the different thought worlds of those stakeholder groups.

**Customers:** The general theme was that companies are realising that they are not able to reach their sustainability goals without engaging customers and influencing their behaviour to become more sustainable.

The key discussion point was around how companies engage their customer and understanding the customers' needs, and how those needs might change in the future.

3M talked about **observing the customer** in order to develop innovative solutions which the customer would not have thought of – really sitting next to them and watching how they are working and understanding the real issues they have, rather than asking them what they want and then coming back and testing. They gave the vivid example of the development of surgical drapes with pockets for the temporarily removed eyeball in cataract operations!

**Suppliers:** The discussion focused on the existing challenges that many businesses (both as buyers and suppliers) still face with the more traditional 'transactional' approach to supply chain management, which are often complex and challenging but not necessarily 'innovative' - whilst trying to adapt to a more **collaborative and entrepreneurial two-way approach** to working with supply chains.

### **What do organizations need to do well to collaborate for sustainability innovation?**

The conference reinforced my finding from my academic work in identifying organizations need to be able to do the following:

- Win hearts and minds - not just make the business case or prove the technology
- Take a systems approach – think outside the boundaries of the organization
- Understand the complexity of innovation – and recognize that this can be hard to navigate within the organization and take steps to address this
- Bring ideas from the outside – engage in networking, recognize that innovation can come from places you wouldn't expect
- Engage marketers and brand owners – they are critical to getting the message across the customers
- Treat customers are part of your organization – not just passive consumers, but co-creators of innovation
- Engaging employees – through leadership, communication and telling stories

See more about the event Twitter:

#3MInnovation #RBWeek

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