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Making Sustainability Sustainable

Lessons From Radio Flyer

By Dorie Ellzey Blesoff

Introduction

Today we see a growing momentum to reduce carbon footprints and co-create new social and economic structures. We witness a global turn toward sustainability by corporate leaders such as Ray Anderson (recently deceased CEO of Interface Carpet, <http://www.interfaceglobal.com/Company/Leadership-Team/Ray-Watch.aspx>), campus-based international groups such as Net Impact (graduate and undergraduate business students committed to “changing the world through business,” <http://www.netimpact.org>), civic and community leaders such as Wangari Maathai (founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/w.php?id=3>) or Will Allen (founder of Growing Power in Milwaukee, WI <http://www.growingpower.org>), and the myriad of less famous business, educational, public, non-profit, and grass-roots organizations who are changing people’s daily lifestyle behaviors.

A key question for organizations seeking to be more environmentally sustainable is how to reduce the carbon footprint in sourcing, design and delivery of product/services, day-to-day processes, energy use, waste, and end-of-life disposition of any products.

A key question for OD professionals is how to contribute vision, energy, and support of the momentum for sustainability in boardrooms, workplaces, classrooms, neighborhoods, villages, and in fields, rivers, forests where the sustainability drama is unfolding.

This article highlights my partnership with Radio Flyer, a private company that has grown its sustainability practices over the past five years. Woven throughout the article is the framework I have developed, Three Conditions for Sustainable Change (© 2006), to reflect the steps that were taken, and to provide an approach that can be replicated in other organizational contexts. The framework is as follows:

A change will be sustainable if:

1. It is clearly connected to the core purpose and identity of the organization, in the context of change drivers in the external environment.
2. It involves a critical mass of members and stakeholders of the organization in a meaningful way that allows them to develop their commitment.
3. It is accepted into the culture and becomes part of the routines and practices on a daily basis.

After defining the terms, I will share three chapters in the sustainability journey taken by Radio Flyer, link each chapter with one of the Three Conditions of Sustainable Change, and then offer reflection about the role of the OD practitioner.

Defining the Terms

An early publicized definition of sustainability came from the 1987 UN Brundtland Commission (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brundtland_Commission). More recent definitions include one found in the book, *Triple Bottom Line* (Savitz & Weber, 2006):

Sustainability respects the interdependence of living beings on one another and on their natural environment. Sustainability means operating a business in a way that causes minimal harm to living creatures and does not deplete but rather restores and enriches the environment.

In 2004, I helped organize a symposium sponsored by Northwestern University's Masters Program in Learning and Organizational Change, "Making Sustainable Choices." It brought together businesses, non-profits, and students who wanted to learn about successful efforts to promote sustainable individual and organizational practices. We used a wholistic definition from Forum for the Future (<http://www.forumforthefuture.org/>):

A dynamic process which enables all people to realize their potential and to improve their quality of life in ways that simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth's life support systems.

In this article I also introduce the concept of "sustainable change." This phrase may appear to be an oxymoron, because if change is truly sustainable, it is no longer a change. A sustained change becomes the new normal, the "way we do things around here." Sustainable change endures; it is the opposite of a flash-in-the-pan program du jour.

The sustainable change portrayed in this article is the *shift toward sustainability as a strategic orientation*.

Radio Flyer Story Chapter One: Declaration of Direction

I listened with excitement as Radio Flyer "Chief Wagon Officer," Robert Pasin, concluded his remarks at the July 19, 2006 celebration at Chicago's Adler Planetarium.

I invite you to re-commit to the Values that have always made us great and join me as we turn the page in

this love story that is Radio Flyer, dream bigger than ever before, and together, reach for the stars.

Pasin is the third generation CEO of the family-owned business, Radio Flyer (www.radioflyer.com). A beloved American icon, the "little red wagon" and other Radio Flyer products have been creating warm memories for generation after generation of children since 1917, when Pasin's grandfather founded the company. Radio Flyer is a small company with a huge brand, a huge heart, and a huge vision.

In 2006, Pasin was leading this mature and successful company to reinvent itself, starting with the foundation of a newly articulated Vision, Mission, and Values:

VISION: To be the world's most loved children's brand.

MISSION: To bring smiles to kids of all ages and to create warm memories that last a lifetime.

VALUES: We follow the "Little Red Rule": Every time we touch people's lives, they will feel great about Radio Flyer, because of each Radio Flyer Team Member's commitment to:

- » Integrity in all we do.
- » Accountability to ourselves and others.
- » Passion for excellence.
- » "Can Do" attitude.
- » Fast, friendly, and effective service.
- » Having fun, spreading smiles.

I was introduced to Robert Pasin in 2005 when he was looking for assistance in turbo-charging the company's culture to launch a new trajectory of growth. As a leader strongly committed to growing the company "from good to great," using Jim Collins' book as a guide, Robert was building a team that could find the best way to get to "great." I joined on as an external consultant to help Pasin and his team lay the foundation for a new chapter in Radio Flyer history.

During our early conversations, in

addition to a lot of listening, I suggested methods to strengthen the shared vision among the management team and the workforce. We utilized communication and learning and development levers to help the company move in the desired direction as it navigated through a period of intense change. Pasin and his team had already instituted a yearly Goals process for all employees and a rigorous Selection process. In 2006 they established a Vision, Mission, and Values Committee to organize the first "Little Red Rule" award. They held monthly all-company meetings with business updates. They partnered with me to provide company-wide training to encourage giving and receiving feedback, process improvement, and collaboration. Also they began to encourage more employee involvement and engagement. They made "fun" a real force at Radio Flyer.

During discussions with Pasin in 2005-2006, I would sometimes mention that best practices of "great" organizations included triple bottom line orientation, social responsibility activities, and environmental sustainability practices. Pasin supported those ideas and wanted to move in those directions. He was also suitably humble about claiming anything along those lines until there were actual initiatives in place with real results.

A new HR leader came on board in 2007 and immediately began to help guide the cultural evolution and provide leadership as a strategic HR thinker and partner.

By 2007-2008, a shift became evident in the customer and employee base. In addition to the consistent primacy of toy safety, parents were beginning to raise concerns about the "green factor" of products. In late 2007, Wal-Mart, a Radio Flyer customer, announced its new vendor guidelines requiring reduction in carbon footprint and, in particular, the Packaging Scorecard to measure reduction in packaging.

One of Radio Flyer's disciplines is a semi-annual meeting of all departments to identify emerging external trends

in consumers, competitors, vendors, governmental regulations, the economy, etc. The senior leadership team then distills all the information into significant external trends to which Radio Flyer must respond. Because of this practice, Radio Flyer was not taken by surprise by new demands from its key stakeholders.

At the same time, suggestions and feedback from employees revealed a growing desire for Radio Flyer to be more involved in socially responsible activities and sustainability efforts. Many of the newer employees were millennials/Generation Y (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Y). Research about millennials has shown they highlight social responsibility as an important workplace issue in companies they join (<http://www.coneinc.com/news/request.php?id=1090>).

Sustainable Change Condition #1

A change will be sustainable if:

- 1. It is clearly connected to the core purpose and identity of the organization, in the context of change drivers in the external environment.**

This first condition of sustainable change emphasizes the need to define success in terms of the basic purpose of the organization as well as the dynamic forces constantly shifting in the world. A proposed change stands a better chance of being implemented successfully if it embodies shared organizational values and vision. Daily common experiences and accessible

An OD practitioner can add value to the quality of strategic thinking at the senior leadership level, and make a lasting difference, by introducing sustainability into the conversation. From a values perspective, what would sustainable concerns look like if they were woven into the fabric of other commitments treasured by the organization? From a strategy perspective, what impact would environmental sustainability initiatives have on the stakeholders: customers, employees, shareholders, or Boards?

leadership enable smaller companies, such as Radio Flyer, to reinforce a cohesive sense of vision and values.

In addition, if a proposed change is responsive to stakeholder trends, to market and financial realities, the case for change will be compelling. Assuming that most members want their organization to succeed, a compelling case for change enables them to commit to a new definition of success, and the new behaviors necessary to reach it.

For Radio Flyer, the decision to explore what it would take to become more eco-friendly and to demonstrate reduction in its carbon footprint was entirely consistent with wanting to be loved by the world's children (Vision), with bringing smiles and creating warm memories (Mission), and with having anyone touched by Radio Flyer feel good about Radio Flyer (Values—Little Red Rule).

OD Contribution in this Phase: Influence the Strategic Conversation

Early in my career, eager to differentiate myself as a process consultant (Schein, 1990), I made an assumption that I should subordinate my own sense of priorities to the system with which I was working. I have since learned that true partnering requires mutual sharing of concerns, passions and ideas (Block, 1981), with a regular two-way exchange of feedback, in the context of the organization's vision for itself.

Because of my own commitment to environmental sustainability, I immersed

myself in the latest research about climate change, sustainable practices in businesses, green technologies, and potential partners for a multiple range of sustainability activities. I learned enthusiastically about increasingly accessible ways to reduce carbon footprint and become more eco-friendly.

If an OD practitioner is in a collaborative relationship with a client, and is persuaded that sustainability makes sense, a logical next step is to inquire how a clearer environmental sustainability strategy can embody organizational values and core purpose, accomplish strategy, improve performance, and achieve long-term economic sustainability.

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Radio Flyer Story Chapter Two: Gaining Momentum

In December of 2008, Pasin asked me to present a book summary of Daniel Esty and Andrew Winston's *Green to Gold* (2006) at the officer strategy session. The central theme in the book is that there is an "eco-advantage" which smart companies recognize and act upon and that environmental protection and business success are mutually beneficial objectives.

At the conclusion of the ensuing discussion, the Radio Flyer leadership team committed to research and implement ways to integrate sustainability into the product lines, the facility, and daily operational practices in the workplace. The leaders of Product Development, Sales, Operations, Human Resources, and Finance were all on board and ready to move ahead.

Within a month, in January of 2009, Radio Flyer launched a company-wide learning experience and an employee task force, the Eco-Flyers. I facilitated a company-wide workshop we called the “CarbonCafé,” a hybrid of the conversation-based World Café (www.theworldcafe.com), which featured updated information about climate change and sustainability trends. The format and proposed actions were based on David Gershon’s *Low Carbon Diet* (2006), and workshops provided by a local community network (www.greencommunityconnections.org).

The purpose of this workshop was to blend information with inspiration, by providing compelling facts about climate change followed by activities individuals could participate in. My PowerPoint presentation, “Coming to our Senses about Sustainability,” had a three-part theme: Sense of Wonder (with pictures of the earth’s beauty), Sense of Urgency (with pictures, graphs, and text regarding the impact of US lifestyle and quotes from the International Panel on Climate Change), and Sense of Commitment. Seated at tables of 4-5 people, participants were invited to match images (pre-cut from magazines) and explain to the others at their table their answers to the following questions:

1. What is most concerning to you about global warming—for you, your loved ones, your community, and the future?
2. What are you aware of that gives you hope we can successfully address the current environmental crisis?

At the conclusion of the workshop, the two new co-chairs of the EcoFlyers launched the “One Ton Challenge,” asking individual employees to commit to losing a ton or more of carbon emissions in their daily life. Using an excel spreadsheet template that itemized specific activities, all employees turned in results monthly to a member of the EcoFlyers. A six-foot thermometer occupied a visible hallway spot

The pivotal factor for success is whether most of the stakeholders feel they have been invited to participate in some aspect of planning or preparing for the change, before it is “thrown over the wall” to be implemented at the department/functional level. If an organization is receptive and ready, one of the whole system methods for change (e.g., Wholesale Change, Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space, World Café, and the Conference Model) can accomplish commitment in a condensed period of time.

for 6 months, tracking the progress of the One Ton Challenge campaign. Based on the commitments given at the workshop the goal was set at reducing 93 tons of carbon, and the final result exceeded expectations at a whopping 108 tons of reduced carbon emissions.

Other initiatives orchestrated by the EcoFlyers in 2009 and 2010 included: weekly Green Tips; creation of reusable shopping bags with the Radio Flyer logo and “Fueled by Fun” (a carpool ride board); green activities with the kids on Take Our Kids to Work Day (painting rain barrels, planting gardens in wheelbarrows and wagons); battery recycling center; and more. Human Resources initiated a reimbursement benefit (matching the IRS) for biking to work.

As some lifestyle shifts were occurring among the Radio Flyer workforce, Pasin asked me to help research potential consulting firms with whom Radio Flyer could partner to analyze and propose new production materials and processes that would permanently increase the sustainability of Radio Flyer products. It took a little time, and trial and error, to find the right partner. Members of the Product Development department led the analysis, planning, and piloting of the recommendations that emerged.

Sustainable Change Condition #2

A change will be sustainable if:

2. **It involves a critical mass of members and stakeholders of the organization in a meaningful way that allows them to develop their commitment.**

Most OD practitioners recognize the power of meaningfully involving people in a change process that impacts them.

Condition #2 uses the term “critical mass” because there is no magic percentage. The pivotal factor for success is whether most of the stakeholders feel they have been invited to participate in some aspect of planning or preparing for the change, before it is “thrown over the wall” to be implemented at the department/functional level. If an organization is receptive and ready, one of the whole system methods for change (e.g., Wholesale Change, Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space, World Café, and the Conference Model) can accomplish commitment in a condensed period of time.

In organizations where leaders are not focusing on employee engagement, it is still possible to create opportunities to build commitment. Activities can include information-sharing with active two-way communication, involving informal leaders and voices from all throughout the organization, or setting up book clubs or learning circles to educate people about the specifics of climate change and sustainability efforts.

What stands out in the Radio Flyer

example is the energy, enthusiasm, and growing expertise that the EcoFlyers contributed. Supported by leadership, the EcoFlyers were able to impact the entire workforce. Their efforts were not an afterthought to “help people buy in.” There was a true invitation and legitimate channel to bring forward the ideas, commitment, and energy of the workforce.

At Radio Flyer, engagement is integral to the culture of growing from good to great. The Little Red Rule is applied internally, as well as externally. The employment brand incorporates the promise of working at Radio Flyer: Love your job, Grow with Us, Join the Family/Join the Fun. During these years (2008-2010), Radio Flyer began applying for (and winning) workplace awards to help benchmark against well-recognized employers of choice.

Also at this time, in 2010, an employee contest resulted in the renaming of all employees to “Flyers.” Fun.

OD Contribution in this Phase: Facilitate Learning and Engagement

The educational immersion and networking I did in my first few years working with Radio Flyer now came into play. The Carbon Café was a great way to combine learning with buy-in. I was asked to formulate learning events for the leadership team and the entire workforce. Additionally, I was given an opportunity to work with the co-chairs of the EcoFlyers to make suggestions, and develop and implement ideas. As an example, I organized a benchmarking trip to a successful Chicago eco-friendly products company (<http://www.portionpaccorp.com>) as I continued to provide resources from other sustainability groups with which I was networked.

In 2009, I was aware that more and more organizations were reaching toward new levels of green practices, and I was able to research and provide suggestions that sometimes proved helpful. However, the leadership team, the EcoFlyers, and others in the company were also actively involved in discovering relevant information and growing their green expertise.

Radio Flyer Chapter Three: Making Sustainability Sustainable

The US economy reached its lowest point for the consumer products industry in 2009. Suppliers were driving costs up; reduced consumer demand was driving prices down. Tough decisions had to be made.

The focus of this article is not economic sustainability, but it is clear that for any organization to endure, its financial foundation must be viable and resilient enough to weather hard times. Sensitivity to trends and anticipation of various scenarios, girds a company to prepare for the downs as well as the ups.

New changes are often at risk of derailment in an economic downturn. To its credit, Radio Flyer leadership took the long view and continued to pay attention to its purpose, values, and vision. Radio Flyer leadership focused on driving its economic engine, ensuring goal alignment, investing in selection and development, and continuing to build a strong social fabric based on teamwork and fun across the company.

In the sustainability momentum, two major initiatives were already in progress. One was the green renovation of the headquarters physical facility. The other was the selection of a consulting partner, to help analyze and implement the greening of Radio Flyer products.

The renovation was postponed until economic indicators were healthier and the consultant search was slowed.

Now, in 2011, both efforts are back on track. The headquarters facility will be LEED certified (www.usgbc.org/LEED), featuring reuse of the current structure, geo-thermal heating and cooling, natural lighting, and rain cisterns for irrigation of the outside grounds. The surrounding landscape will include space for native plantings and cultivated gardens, trees, a playground, and a walking path. More than just a symbol of sustainability, the facility will produce a substantial reduction in carbon

emissions and it will serve as a role model and educational focal point for stakeholders and other companies.

The partnership with the selected consulting firm is proceeding full-steam ahead to drive more greening into the product lines. Radio Flyer products already fulfill the generic definition of sustainability—they endure, usually for several generations. (Who does not have a story of discovering their childhood wagon, still in working condition, stored with their parents or grandparents, waiting for a new group of children?) The next level of opportunity is to make Radio Flyer products that use less or release less carbon emissions during their life cycle.

The EcoFlyers have also continued to make headway. During 2011, they initiated the phasing-out of all plastic ware and the phasing-in of real silverware in the Radio Flyer Café. They conducted a cell phone recycling event to benefit an organization for abused women and children. They delivered lunch-time “Food for Thought” video showings of educational green topics. They designed and purchased stainless steel water bottles with the Radio Flyer logo. They have also partnered with the Wellness Committee to sponsor a “Biking 101” presentation, and, more recently, to sign people up for weekly boxes of locally grown organic produce, delivered to the company office.

A new committee was formed in 2010. Called the “Smile Squad,” its purpose is to organize events that promote Radio Flyer’s work of social responsibility. The company-wide events now focus on supporting activities of partners who promote health and well-being of children, especially in the field of outdoor play. The work goes on. At the August 2011 company meeting, Pasin stood in front of the company and said “I’ve always believed Radio Flyer was a force for good in the world. Now we are going to focus that force on being environmentally sustainable for the future of the world’s children.”

Is everything accomplished that

Radio Flyer has set out to do? No. Is there real progress being made, with long-lasting impact on the environment? Absolutely. Is it clear that this change is becoming the new normal? All evidence points to Yes. Geothermal heating and cooling is not a fly-by-night arrangement. Products with recycled plastic components, reduction in packaging, lifestyle changes on the part of the Flyers, operational practices that favor reduction, recycling and reusing—these are measurable changes that have real, positive impact, for generations, in the best tradition of the Radio Flyer brand.

Sustainable Change Condition #3

A change will be sustainable if:

3. It is accepted into the culture and becomes part of the routines and practices on a daily basis.

I think this condition speaks for itself. To be sustained as a new normal, a change must be integrated into the ongoing goals for specific individuals/departments/system, measured as part of an organization's success factors, included in agendas of meetings on a regular basis, accepted as a cultural component taught to new organization members, and included in the evolving story of the organization.

OD Contribution in this Phase: Get out of the Way

At this point, my role began to shift toward being an enthusiastic supporter of the ideas and activities that were increasingly arising from within the Radio Flyer organization. Since I am still contributing to other aspects of Radio Flyer's cultural evolution, I continue to be present and available if asked to provide education or facilitation related to sustainability. I have made a conscious shift from actively

promoting to supporting sustainability as needed.

Summary: The Role of the OD Practitioner

I believe there are four ways I contributed during the Radio Flyer journey toward the sustainable change of environmental sustainability.

1. I promoted the power of linking sustainability to the Vision, Mission, and Values of the organization, and to the longer-term strategy. By sharing innovative examples of other leaders and companies, compelling information about climate change, and raising questions about how to ensure economic sustainability through environmental sustainability, I was able to impact the strategic conversation.
2. At the right time and when asked, I provided educational and engaging learning events at all levels. Through partnering with the leadership team, I was able to facilitate forms of engagement that increased commitment to their declared direction. I researched potential strategic partners and offered benchmarking resources, working closely with an internal employee-led group to keep the momentum growing.
3. I remained intentional about shifting my role from thinking partner and facilitator of change to supporter and resource on an as-needed basis. As the system gets clearer and stronger in its own direction and ability to act, the OD practitioner must consciously move out of the way.
4. I tell the story. I am delighted and grateful that Radio Flyer allows me to share their story and I am hopeful that other OD practitioners become inspired to help make sustainability a sustainable change in organizations with whom they partner.

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