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# DEVELOPING COMMITMENT AMONG DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS: THE BUSINESS CHALLENGE OF ADDRESSING HUMAN AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

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**ABSTRACT**

Contemporary business requires new conceptual frameworks to develop understanding on how relationships can be built among diverse stakeholders in society on issues such as human and ecological sustainability. Critique and examination of the academic literature has identified that this challenge has been unaddressed in empirical research as well as under-theorised.

A number of questions are proposed for further study. These are: what are the key factors for developing affective, continuous and normative commitment among diverse stakeholders? What helping and hindering factors facilitate business commitment to collaborative relationships aimed at addressing broader social goals such as human and ecological sustainability? Can political theories and practices of deliberative decision making and communication processes be successful in helping business meet this challenge?

**KEY WORDS**

*Commitment, Stakeholders, Change, Human and Ecological Sustainability*

# DEVELOPING COMMITMENT AMONG DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS: THE BUSINESS CHALLENGE OF ADDRESSING HUMAN AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines academic literature and case examples which could provide some insight into how commitment can be developed across organisational boundaries to address broader societal challenges such as human and ecological sustainability.

According to Dunphy, Griffiths and Benn (2003:26), at its highest level of performance, organisations can commit to both human and ecological sustainability outcomes. As proposed human sustainability is where:

> an organisation accepts responsibility for contributing to the process of renewing and upgrading human knowledge and skill formation in the community and society. It adopts a strong and clearly defined corporate ethical position based on multiple stakeholder perspectives and seeks to exert influence on the key participants in the industry and in society in general to pursue human welfare, equitable and just social practices and the fulfilment of human potential of all.

Dunphy et al (2003: 26) state that ecological sustainability is where:

> an organisation becomes an active promoter of sustainable values and seeks to influence key participants in the industry and society in general. The organisation is prepared to use its influence to promote positive sustainability policies on the part of governments, the restructuring of markets and the development of community values to facilitate the emergence of a sustainable society.

We argue that alliance building and collaboration, in order to address broader social goals, entails bringing together a more diverse array of stakeholders than other examples of inter-organisational collaborations such as joint ventures, industry clusters and partnerships. When it comes to co-

operation on an issue pertaining a broader social purpose, a wide range of organisational types, interests and identities can be involved. They may include NGO's, individual citizens, media and various forms of government and corporate institutions.

It is anticipated that the drivers and contributors to the development of commitment within this context could be potentially be quite different to one where stakeholders share greater consistency on normative goals, share a similar collective history or have comparable personal motives or organisational values. Hence we argue that questions concerning the barriers and processes that can develop commitment among diverse stakeholders will be of interest to a wide range of business leaders and academics.

## DRIVERS FOR DISOLVING ORGANISATIONAL BOUNDARIES

The academic literature provides some explanation into why the development of commitment among diverse stakeholders has become increasingly important to both business and society. This is evidenced by the increasing recognition of 'boundaryless' organisational structures within business characterised by dissolving organisational boundaries.

According to Palmer, Dunford and Akin (2006) a number of external environmental and internal factors drive the changes which result in dissolving boundaries among various interests, identities and stakeholders. External pressures include greater expectations for reputation and credibility, heightened demands of competition, changing markets, the implication of geopolitical decisions and legislative reform. Internal pressures include the need for greater collaboration and integration, meeting growth targets and adapting to new roles resulting from changing business, positions. Other internal drivers include power and political pressures within an organisation and the desire of leaders to deploy a 'new broom' to a business when they undertake appointed leadership positions. The result of these drivers is the creation of a 'boundaryless organisation', which is in constant change as it seeks greater to obtain greater speed, flexibility, integration and innovation (Palmer et al. 2006:125).

A large number of scholars argue that the scale of these drivers is expanding at an ever-increasing rate and resulting for greater levels of collaboration and transparency (Waddock, Bodell and Graves 2002; Hall and Vredenburg 2003; Hart and Milstein 2003; Moore 2003; Loh and Wackernagel 2004). According to (Benn and Dunphy 2006:2) organisations are now faced with conditions of complexity, chaos, uncertainty, driven by a demand for higher levels of governance, cost- benefit based decision-making and emergence of world society dominated by themes of uncontrollable financial, ecological and terrorist risk. These factors create a society where there is a loss in the faith in traditional systems of authority (Beck, Bonss and Lau 2003), including political and business leaders.

Conditions of greater organisational risk and uncertainty are further heightened by surges in shareholder activism, raised expectation in regard to ethical investment and a public preparedness to question corporate power and intention (Grayson and Hodges 2004). Accordingly, corporations are being required or forced to become more transparent and to develop close relationships with a host of diverse and often unlikely partners. Society now increasingly expects organisations to adhere to practices which allow stakeholders to be heard, build the capacity to hear what the stakeholders say, and to account for their actions to stakeholder expectations and interests (Accountability 2005; Eesley and Lenox 2005).

The emergence of the 'boundaryless organisation' is changing the view of many businesses on the major sources of improved business value, innovation and reputation. A number of writers identify intangible assets as a largely unrecognised source of corporate value (Stewart 1997; Blair 2000; Stewart 2001; Rylatt 2003). Developing commitment to knowledge sharing (Hardy, Phillips and Lawrence 2003; Reagans and McEvily 2003; Rylatt 2003; Pittinsky and Shih 2004) and trust (Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman and Soutter 2000; Adler and Kwon 2002; Nooteboom and Six 2003) is seen as a key component of value generation in contemporary business. As described by Sharma (2005:21) 'Organisational knowledge must not be seen as simply the sum of individual knowledge (Nelson and Winter 1982) but is inextricably located in complex, collaborative social practices (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998) within and outside organizational boundaries (Brown and Duguid 1991; Nokaka 1994).

The diversity of knowledge that resides within a network is much greater than that which resides in a single firm. When network members cooperate in a social community, superior learning opportunities will be generated (Dyer and Nobeoka 1998; Dyer and Nobeoka 2000).'

In this context a major hurdle for organisations is how to approach this challenge by stimulating meaningful dialogue and collective action across a wide spectrum of groups, interests and organisational boundaries (Swell 1998; Dunphy et al. 2003; Rylatt 2003; Florida 2004).

## THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING ACROSS ORGANISATIONAL BOUNDARIES

During the last two decades there has been an increasing recognition within the organisational and management literature (Katz and Kahn 1966; Katz and Kahn 1978; Scott 1981; Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers 1986; Weick 2001; Eesley and Lenox 2005) that most organisations now operate as open systems within complex and rapidly changing environments.

Prior to the emergence of open systems theory (Von Bertalanffy 1972) organisations were often viewed as closed systems. In this understanding most organisational scholars had concentrated their literature on actors (workers, work groups and managers) and processes (motivation, cohesion, control) within organisations. Scant attention was accorded to the environment within which the organisation operated. If noticed, the environment was too often depicted as the source of troubles (Scott 2004:5). In a closed system, relationships are often built on a premise of rationality where each organisation is in full and firm control of their goals, evaluation and commitment levels.

Identity and stakeholder theories have each provided a useful discourse to help explain the tensions and pressures being generated by changing organisational boundaries and open organisational frameworks. According to Stacey organisations are self-organising patterns of conversation, of meaning, in which human identities emerge (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw 2000; Stacey 2001; Stacey 2003). Stacey's theory of 'Complex Responsive Processes' argues that the dynamic between the

formation of individual and collective identities is a major driver for learning and meaning within and among organisations. Stacey highlights how human experience can dramatically affect learning if identity is challenged or shifts. Whether it is a change of role or perceived threat to ones individual or collective identity, anxiety can quickly eventuate and close down of learning can occur if this tension is not handled effectively. According to (Scott and Lane 2000:56) contradictions between perceived internal identity and external image can generate ambiguity and confusion. In this regard it often increasingly required for stakeholder groups might band together to jointly construct organisational identities and clarify organisational boundaries before commitment can be developed. In saying this , many scholars recognise that agreeing and responding to all stakeholder identities, concerns and interests is close to impossible (Bergkamp 2002; Freedman, Wicks and Parmar 2004; Jermier, Forbes and Benn 2006). As well, Gautam, Dick and Wagnar (2004) suggest there is an increased recognition that there may be a clear link between identity theory and organizational commitment.

## DEVELOPING STAKEHOLDER COMMITMENT

So far in this paper we have explored at the drivers and challenges of working within an environment of dissolving organisational boundaries.. These discussions have helped to paint a background picture of a rapidly changing business environment being placed under the strain of meeting the demands and expectations of many diverse stakeholders and interests. It was also noted that is case in the context of addressing issues pertaining to human and ecological sustainabililty.

As we examine the literature on 'organisational commitment', [1] the work of Allen and Meyer (Allen and Meyer 1990; Meyer and Allen 1991) has over the last two decades become an important theoretical framework for scholars to examine the nature of commitment between employers and employees within the boundaries of a closed organisational system. Meyer and Allen's work has been able to identify three distinct components of organisational commitment. The three components are affective, continuance and normative commitment.

[1] 'Organisational commitment' can defined as a 'a stabilizing or obligating force which gives direction to behaviour.' (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001) pp 301. This definition by Meyer and Hersovitich was determined after undertaking a meta-analysis of the literature over the past two decades.

They are defined as follows:

> Affective commitment – an individual's strong desire to pursue a course of action of relevance to a target. [2]
>
> Continuance commitment – if involvement is discontinued, the individual's current or past investment is perceived to be lost. [3]
>
> Normative commitment – an individual's obligation to pursue a course of action towards the attainment of a goal. [4]

Subsequent research has shown the existence of casual effects between affective, continuance and normative antecedent variables and subsequent behaviour. In particular the researchers postulate that the three forms of commitment operated somewhat independently of each other. (Allen and Meyer 1996; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky 2002) Although there was some relationship between affective and normative commitment, continuance commitment was seen as most independent. The research undertaken suggests that it is affective commitment that has the greatest impact on employee behaviour and attitude. Employees with strong affective commitment would be motivated to higher levels of performance and make more meaningful contributions than employees who expressed continuance or normative commitment. The implications of these findings were far-reaching particularly given that the Allen and Meyer as been tested and validated over two decades (Meyer et al. 2002).

The weakness of the work of Allen and Meyer's work is that is limited to a closed system of organisational existence, concentrating its efforts on issues of employee turnover, on the job behaviour including performance, absenteeism and citizenship. In later work they included consequences of personal well-being and willingness to work towards the attainment of organisational goals (Allen and Meyer 1996). However, theoretical study pertaining to the development of commitment of diverse stakeholders within an open organisational system has been largely neglected. There have been some

[2] Example of a scale item of affective commitment– This organisation has a great deal of personal meaning for me.
[3] Example of a scale item of continuance commitment– Too much in my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organisation now
[4] Example of a scale item of normative commitment– One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that I believe that loyalty is important and therefore feel a sense of moral obligation to remain

exceptions, these include, theory development on the commitment levels of virtual workers. (Kirkman and Mathieu 2004; Jermier et al. 2006), occupational commitment, (Carson and Phillips-Carson 2002; Blau 2003) and external commitment to other organisations. (McElroy, Morrow and Laczniak 2001).

We are of the belief that the characteristics and interplay of affective, continuance and normative commitment may well be different in the context of developing commitment in an open organisational framework where issues such as obligation, duty and personal contact may be more influential. It is proposed that this tested and studied in the future.

## DEPLOYING DELIBERATIVE DECISION-MAKING

Given the context of building trust, sense making and common purpose among diverse stakeholders we have become increasingly interested in theory and applications which may provide guidance on how this task can be undertaken. We propose that deliberative decision-making [5] is one method of decision-making which may go so some way to help business better address the challenge of developing commitment and enhanced learning among diverse stakeholders in society. [6] With some exceptions, this literature has been largely ignored in the management and organisational studies (Unerman and Bennett 2004; Benn and Dunphy 2006; Jermier et al. 2006) . Most of the literature has comes from political theorists (Dryzek 2000; Dryzek and List 2004) and public policy and civic engagement scholars (Dryzek 2000; Dryzek and List 2004; Gastil and Levine 2005; Carson and Hart 2006).

Luskin and Fishkin (2003:1) define the deliberative process as follows:

> Deliberating citizens seek relevant information, reflect on the issues, and exchange views with others. The most valuable kind of deliberation is balanced, taking account of information both convenient and inconvenient to given arguments and alternatives, although much naturally occurring deliberation is of course highly imbalanced.

[5] Depending on the scholar deliberative decision-making can also called deliberative democracy. Or is seen as a sub-set, it can be a grammatical difference where deliberative decision-making is part of deliberative democracy. The language of deliberative decision-making is more comfortable in management and literature.

[6] A listing of interventions is maintained by the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation at http://www.thataway.org/resources/understand/models/models.html.

Rather than being satisfied with consensus, the aim of deliberative decision-making is to achieve impartiality and full knowledge of critical issues, concepts akin to Habermas' ideals of full communication (Habermas 1984) and a vibrant public sphere. (Habermas 1992)

According to a number of scholars (Carson and Hartz-Karp 2005; Hendricks 2005; Carson and Hart 2006) deliberative decision-making adheres to three key principles.

- *Representativeness* – participants strongly reflect relevant characteristics of the population. They are randomly selected to match the profile of that population
- *Deliberation* – opportunity for informed deliberation including extensive discussion between people with diverse concerns
- *Influence* – strong contract with policy makers or decision-makers to enact recommendations and influence outcomes

While recognising the potential outcomes for obtaining agreed upon courses of action by diverse stakeholders resulting from application of these principles, we suggest that for business, strict adherence to all principles may be a difficult task. However we do adhere to the propositions that deliberative processes which stimulate knowledge enhancement and trust formation between diverse stakeholders in an open organisational frameworks is an important area of academic study. As discussed during this paper, the academic literature clearly supports the notion that business can't survive in isolation to its environment. Broader challenges such as social and environmental risks associated with economic development would be a case in point (Benn and Dunphy 2006). We suggest that deliberative forms of decision-making may enable business organisations to address these challenges while also recognising the concerns of some scholars and commentators of the direct involvement of corporations in such processes (Shapiro 1999; Shapiro 2003), for instance, argues that participatory exercises involving stakeholders can involve varying degrees of abuse of power and self interest leading to a concerns about the legitimacy and accountability of corporate sponsored [7] deliberative processes. This is particularly important on issues pertaining to ecological and human

[7] John Dryzek a leading authority in green politics and deliberative democracy - In personal communication with Sue Benn (8.25.05), Dryzek stated that he has not written much about business organizations since the statement quoted above but that his general view is that the issue of how an economic organisation can fall under democratic control is still unresolved. Reference: (Jermier et al. 2006) - Chapter Notes at conclusion of manuscript

sustainability where more critically reflective decision-making processes are required between concerned citizens in the public sphere (Jermier et al. 2006).

In the next section of the paper we look to some examples of award-winning organisations that are working towards addressing broader social goals in human and ecological sustainability by deploying aspects of deliberative decision making in their desire to develop commitments among their external and internal stakeholders.

## CASE EXAMPLES

The following case studies highlight organisations that have demonstrated award-winning capabilities in developing commitment to human and ecological sustainability among diverse stakeholders. Industries represented include insurance, finance and coffee manufacture. These case studies provide some evidence of deployment of deliberative decision-making processes. Various themes are examined including bringing in the community, bringing in the employees, developing shared understanding and developing leadership networks.

### *Bringing in the community*

Bringing in community activists or community-based organisations can lead to informed deliberation, acting as an invaluable source of knowledge to organisations attempting to address sustainability goal by enhancing cross-boundary commitment. Green Mountain Coffee Roster, for example, the firm rated No 1 Corporate Citizen in 2006 by Business Ethics Magazine, began to improve its environmental performance in 1989 when it formed an environmental committee and created a rainforest nut coffee to support the Rainforest Alliance, a non-profit dedicated to protecting ecosystems. The company has grown increasingly active in the countries where coffee is grown and has been a pioneer in the fair trade movement, which pays coffee growers stable, fair prices (Roth 2006).

***Bringing in employees***

Organisations which are successful in developing commitment to broader social and/or environmental goals appear to recognise their reliance on general employees to make this shift. Managers and leaders are important, as we shall discuss below, but a number of case examples highlight the importance of representing the general employee in such a change. As we have said, this principle of representativeness is a quality associated with deliberative decision-making.

The No 1 in the list of 100 Best Corporate Citizens selected by Business Ethics Magazine in 2006, Green Mountain Coffee Roaster, provides a good example of the power of employee commitment to make a difference in the sustainability strategy of the firm. According to Winston Rost, Green Mountain Coffee Roaster's director of coffee appreciation, taking a number of its 600 employees on an annual trip, to coffee-growing cooperatives in Vera Cruz and Oaxaca, Mexico has given them an appreciation for how hard the coffee growers work and has dramatically raised staff awareness of the value of the firm’s long held commitment to social and environmental issues. According to Rost, many employees now say they will never spill another bean again. As well as being a good corporate citizen, the firm is also showing economic sustainability. It saw 2005 revenue of $161.5 million with net income of $9 million, a 15 percent increase over the year prior (Roth 2006).

Californian-based HP is the only company that has made the top ten in the list of Best Corporate Citizens each year, mainly on the strength of their diversity and community performance. With HP also, employees are crucial to their success. According to HP’s vice president of global inclusion and diversity, 60 employee resource groups involving a rich mix of race, gender, and sexual orientation air professional development issues and raise awareness of diversity issues. HP also has some highly innovative environmental programs such as developing model recycling standards which they share with their competitors (Roth 2006).

Westpac Banking Corporation, the global leader in sustainability and Corporate and Social Responsibility (CSR), as assessed by the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, recognises the problem that some sections of the firm, such as Information Technology (IT), may prioritise technological

imperatives and not develop an on-going commitment to the business model of Westpac which places a high priority on intangible value and CSR. In this organisation, for example, an annual Chief Information Officer's Challenge Progam brings in external consultants to facilitate an intensive series of workshops. A different selection of IT managers each year explores and produces recommendations on topics designed to link the IT division into the business as a whole. Each year the series produces confronting and challenging recommendations for both the IT function and the Bank and each year some of these recommendations are acted upon. One of us has been consulting with Westpac on this program since 2003 and can attest to its value in linking IT into the wider CSR ethos of the firm.

At Insurance Australia Group (IAG), another high-profile organisation which strongly articulates sustainability goals, has won awards for Triple Bottom Line and sustainability reporting, and is included is the FTSE4Good Global 100 Index, monitoring employee engagement is seen as crucial to the organisation developing commitment to these goals A survey-based instrument is used to assess the level of engagement with the sustainability goals.

In the 2005 Your Voice Survey (IAG 2005.

- 73 percent of respondents surveyed said "The organisation's position on safety, environment and community is important and meaningful for me" and
- 74 percent of respondents surveyed said "I am proud of IAG's role in helping to reduce and share financial risks across the community".

***Developing shared understanding***

A shared normative commitment to the central importance of safety is crucial to achieving IAG's aim of adding stakeholder value through enabling a safer community, roads and workplace. To further this aim IAG has developed partnerships with community groups at a local, state and national level. One such partnership is with St John Ambulance. The partnership involves St John becoming the primary supplier of First Aid training to IAG with the first four hours of First Aid training sessions being made available to all IAG staff. The long-term aim is to offer free First Aid training to all policyholders in order to reduce personal and community risk. The two organisations often put out co-branded

communications and have commenced work on a number of other awareness raising and mentoring programs (Benn and Wilson 2006).

The 2005 Sustainability Report by IAG records significant advancement in the firm's risk reduction community initiatives, in the areas of road and home safety, crime prevention, workplace safety and climate change. In an example of a program linking risk reduction for the company with risk reduction for the community, one community grant supported a young crime offenders' program in the large regional centre of Newcastle where indigenous community leaders and elders work with the police running cultural camps.

Fostering sustainable communities is the aspect of sustainability which is most actively pursued by the education strategy at IAG. This interpretation requires a focus on safety, financial and social issues. Environmental issues are addressed by other parts of the organisation. According to Sam Mostyn, Group Exectutive Culture and Reputation, IAG's data on crime and risks can be extremely influential in raising community awareness:

> We looked at our data and saw that we had twice as many claims in three parts of NSW and they were Shellharbour, South Sydney and Dubbo. So we went into those areas and went to the police and local councils and said – 'Is it worth us having a conversation with you to show you our data, our data is saying something that really disturbs us, you know your communities we don't, is it worth us sitting down with you to work out whether there is something in your community that's driving this crime?' We've called these our social capital investment programs and in each case we have continued to work with those communities (Sam Mostyn, quoted in Benn and Wilson, 2006).

***Developing leadership networks***

Leaders of firms who are successfully working across the limits of their boundary network with leaders of firms with similar values in order to influence policy makers. In an example of such networking between business leaders in response to government inaction associated with climate change, six Australian CEOs (from the major companies IAG, Westpac Banking Corp, Visy Industries, BP Australasia, Origin Energy, and Swiss Re) recently met to form the Business

Roundtable on Climate Change. In contrast to the Business Council of Australia, which has not been able to develop a position on climate change, the Roundtable Group argues that climate change is a major business risk and that action is a business imperative. They have produced research showing that it is possible for Australia to cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 60 per cent from 2000 year levels before 2050 and still have strong economic growth. Their Roundtable Report argues 250,000 jobs could be at stake if greenhouse action is delayed. Delay will also mean the need for much more drastic and costly action later on, they argue. The momentum for change is likely to come from their call for a national, market-based carbon pricing mechanism", which it wants the Government to sketch out a framework for next year.

Each of these case examples highlights some adherence by the organisation in question to the principles of deliberative decision-making. ***Table One*** lists a number of success factors from the case studies described above.

***Table One- Business Success Factors in Deliberative Decisions Making***

| **Principle** | **Success Factor** |
|---|---|
| Representativeness | • Active and meaningful engagement of stakeholders in business strategy including, for example, senior executive, employees, opinion leaders, activists and marginalized groups in society.<br>• Agreed commitment to addressing problems, opportunities and accountabilities<br>• Clear processes to build trust, goodwill and exchange |
| Deliberation | • Well-established forums for frank exchange, learning and feedback.<br>• Sense making opportunities to examine history, knowledge and beliefs of affected groups, identities and interests.<br>• Prepared to re-think and re-position strategy |
| Influences | • Clear articulation of values and intentions (CSR, Intangible Value and Innovation)<br>• Development of shared purpose and commitment to a cause<br>• Co-creation of strategy between stakeholders including policy, action and review |

## IMPLICATIONS

Developing commitment among diverse stakeholders is a complex and challenging pursuit. Dissolving of organisational boundaries provides many unique circumstances in which business leaders and academics needs to address, including human and ecological sustainability.

We recommend further study be undertaken to closely examine the interplay and causal effects of commitment in an open organisational system. Questions could include what are the key factors for developing affective, continuous and normative commitment among diverse stakeholders? What helping and hindering factors facilitate business commitment to collaborative relationships aimed at addressing broader social goals such as human and ecological sustainability. Can political theories and practices of deliberative decision making and communication processes be successful in helping business meet this challenge?

Our opinion is that factors, which stimulate affective, continuance and normative commitment overlap with processes as deliberative decision-making. But we recognise these factors may be somewhat different to which has been identified in past research in closed organisational systems and needs revisiting. In this regard we take a less prescriptive view of what deliberative decision-making should entail, seeking instead to accept the over-arching intention of creating a public sphere for lively discourses and ventilation of feelings as fundamental to enhanced human and ecological sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

The business literature is in urgent need of greater guidance on how commitment can be developed among diverse stakeholders within an open organisational framework. Existing theory and empirical research on commitment needs to be tested and observed in a new context of dissolving organisational boundaries, ever-changing obligations and expectations. Only then, will researchers and business leaders have the conceptual understanding of what improves commitment to broader social goals such as human and ecological sustainability.

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