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Developing Leaders for the Future: Integrating sustainability into mainstream leadership programmes

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Introduction

Over past few decades, sustainability issues have become progressively more prominent on the business agenda, shifting from a focus on compliance and reputation management to longer-term risk management and competitive advantage¹. New business models are now emerging in response to the perceived potential for a 'perfect storm' of global events² - the challenge over the next 20 years of producing 50% more food and energy and 30% more fresh water, whilst simultaneously mitigating and adapting to climate change.

The pace and scale at which companies are responding to this agenda varies widely³, but awareness of the strategic importance to the long-term sustainability of a business is steadily on the increase. The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Survey⁴ in 2011 brought the cross-cutting interconnected global risks sharply into focus for many business leaders, but even before then Accenture's 2010 survey⁵ showed that 93% of 766 CEOs of large corporations considered sustainability important to their company's future success, and 96% thought that sustainability issues should be fully integrated into the strategy and operations of a company. This development has been accompanied by a growing number of sustainability-related initiatives in companies, including appointing a sustainability function with representation at board level; the development of separate business strategies and targets for sustainability; annual corporate reporting on social and environmental performance; stakeholder dialogues about creating shared value and the social return on invested capital; and more sophisticated standards and metrics to manage supply and value chains.

However, while these initiatives are directionally appropriate, it is arguable that they are not commensurate with the scale and rate of change needed to bring global human activity within planetary boundaries⁶. For example, only 36% of executives indicate that in practice their company really does have a strategic approach to sustainability⁷. Moreover, these efforts are often not tied to performance metrics (a recent study showed that only 18% of companies link pay to sustainability indicators⁸), and where more substantial sustainability strategies do exist they are often limited in scope to selected aspects of business operations, and thus by definition do not impact on the workings of the whole organisation.

¹ **Martin, R. & Kemper, A.**, 2012, Saving the Planet: A Tale of Two Strategies. *Harvard Business Review*, April; Visser, W. & Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, 2009, *Landmarks for Sustainability: Events and Initiatives that have Changed our World*. Sheffield: Greenleaf.

² Professor John Beddington, former UK Government Chief Scientist, March 2009

<http://www.govnet.co.uk/news/govnet/professor-sir-john-beddingtons-speech-at-sduk-09>

³ **Roome, N.J.**, 2006, Forum: Transformations to Sustainability – a Leadership Challenge. *Business Strategy and the Environment* 15: 137-138; **Porter, M.E. & Kramer, M.R.**, 2010, Creating Shared Value. *Harvard Business Review*, 89: 62-77.

⁴ **World Economic Forum**, 2011, *Global Risks 2011*

⁵ **Accenture**, 2010, *A New Era of Sustainability: UN Global Compact-Accenture CEO Study 2010*

⁶ **Rockström, J. et al.**, 2009, A safe operating space for humanity. *Nature*, 461: 472-475

⁷ **McKinsey**, 2011, *The Business of Sustainability*.

⁸ **Economist Intelligence Unit**, 2010, *Managing for Sustainability*.

Recent research conducted by the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) found that, even among executives who were taking part in sustainability leadership programmes, while 72% believed that sustainability was strongly or quite strongly embedded in the awareness of their organisations' senior leaders, only 42% agreed it was embedded into existing strategies, plans and processes to any meaningful extent.⁹

Nevertheless, a number of leading businesses have made sustainability more central to their core business activities, aligning it with their long term vision and values and their strategic and operational objectives. Examples include Interface as an early pioneer of this approach since 1994; Marks and Spencer which published its Plan A in 2007; GE which built its marketing strategy around Ecomagination in 2005, and IBM's Smarter Planet initiative (2008). Other recent examples include Nestlé's Creating Shared Value (publicly launched in 2009), Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan (2010), PUMA's EP&L account (2010), and Kingfisher's strategy to become net positive in key areas of its business (2012).

The strategic positioning of sustainability has resulted in an extensive body of academic and practitioner literature on how sustainability could and should be embedded within organisations¹⁰. The case is made that for sustainability to be embedded it needs to become integral to business strategy in its broadest sense, and to pervade what every executive, every manager and every employee does. This has direct implications for the nature of leadership development within companies, and in this regard CISL draws a distinction between conventional leadership development and sustainability leadership development as shown in the following model.¹¹

⁹ Internal survey of 200 senior leaders taking part in CPSL Executive Programmes in 2012.

¹⁰ For an extensive review, see **Bertels, S. et al.**, 2010, *Embedding sustainability in organizational culture: A systematic review of the body of knowledge*. Network for Business Sustainability.

¹¹ See **Courtice, P.**, 2013, *The critical link: strategy and sustainability in leadership development*.



Figure 1: Embedding sustainability principles into organisational vision, strategy, and leadership development processes

Here, both conventional and specialist, sustainability-oriented leadership development programmes play a role in influencing senior leaders' thinking and action on sustainability issues. However, an openness to the wider context – the interconnectedness of various global factors, an ability to employ systems thinking, and an awareness of shifting societal norms – is crucial. Ideally, this wider context should both influence the organisation's business practice from the bottom up, and, even more critically, must be embedded within organisational vision (and thus corporate strategy) through the ability of leaders at the very top to engage with these issues on a personal level, and via a variety of routes.

Research Report

To examine and extend this model CISL carried out more in-depth research to understand better the integration of sustainability as a human resource challenge within companies. Human resource professionals are now increasingly interested in understanding the synergies between the sustainability challenge and conventional HR issues: in recruiting and retaining top talent; creating incentives for exceptional performance; and enhancing critical competencies¹². One of the strongest potential links here is in employee engagement, where the sense that the company is making a positive social or environmental contribution, or better still the employee can personally make that contribution, is an

¹² Cambridge Institute for Industry, 2007, *Human resources and sustainable development*.

invaluable contributor to employee engagement¹³. Research by the Corporate Leadership Council suggests that ‘engaged’ employees are 87% less likely to leave their organisation. According to the IES/Work Foundation, if companies increased investment in workplace engagement by 10%, they would increase profits by £1,500 per employee per year. That is because engaged employees generate 43% more revenue than disengaged ones and highly engaged organisations have the potential to reduce staff turnover by 87% and improve performance by 20%¹⁴.

In a related area, for senior managers, the Boston Consulting Group finds that there is a high correlation between the depth of a business leader’s experience with sustainability and the drivers and benefits that he or she perceives. For example, 68% of business leaders with sustainability expertise cited improved financial returns as a benefit from their organisation’s investments in sustainability initiatives, compared with only 32% for novices¹⁵. This raises important issues for the nature of leadership development, posing the question as to the extent to which sustainability could or should be integral to mainstream leadership development.

CISL’s study explored the challenges of and opportunities for integrating sustainability into the practices of executive development. The study examined nine leading companies from the perspective of Heads of Learning/HR and Heads of Sustainability (CSOs). It sought to capture current practice and innovation and to identify new models that might accelerate the pace of change. The following objectives guided the work:

1. To better understand the nature of current corporate leadership training and development programmes;
2. To identify the extent to which sustainability has been integrated or in any way linked to these programmes;
3. To understand the extent to which sustainability is perceived as a unique challenge or simply another management task which needs a development response;
4. To identify barriers to and opportunities for the integration of sustainability into corporate leadership training and development programmes; and
5. To learn from and share any innovations in the practices of integrating sustainability into corporate leadership training and development programmes.

The research design reflected the fact that sustainability leadership has many different interpretations and is highly context-dependent¹⁶. The focus was on the conditions under which leadership development programmes are shaped within organisations, and how far they serve their purpose; the aim was not to establish a comparative benchmark or ranking between the performance of participating companies or with extant literature.

¹³ **Visser, W. & Crane, A.**, 2010, Corporate Sustainability and the Individual: Understanding What Drives Sustainability Professionals as Change Agents, *SSRN Working Paper Series*, 25 February 2010.

¹⁴ **Visser, W.**, 2012, Family Friendly Enterprise, *The Guardian*, 1 October.

¹⁵ **BCG**, 2009, The Business of Sustainability: Imperatives, Advantages and Actions. Boston Consulting Group.

¹⁶ **Visser, W. & Courtice, P.**, 2011, Sustainability Leadership: Linking Theory and Practice, *SSRN Working Paper Series*, 21 October 2011.

Research Findings

In general, interview respondents agreed that integrating sustainability into the roles and practices of leaders, managers and employees is a topical and significant challenge for their organisations, but many pointed out that the current agenda is now centred on *how* sustainability challenges and opportunities can be addressed (i.e. an operational perspective), rather than *why* a company should engage with sustainability at all (i.e. a strategic perspective).

Interviewees were asked how far they felt sustainability posed unique problems, or required different leadership capabilities to other challenges. This proposition, in line with previous exploration,¹⁷ is based on the idea that sustainability represents a ‘wicked’ problem requiring an approach beyond ‘usual’ leadership approaches – since standard leadership development often focuses on the individual’s ability to respond within and reflect the values of the status quo, rather than challenging or reshaping it. Not all interviewees, however, agreed with this proposition: many sustainability challenges can – they argued – be ‘solved’ using existing management skills and techniques. Several respondents argued that sustainability needs to be seen as *both* an aspirational state *and* just another business challenge: for individuals at the highest level in an organisation, it requires a different way of understanding and envisioning the wider context and role of the organisation, and a willingness to participate actively in the reshaping of the business-society relationship; whereas for executives involved in delivering sustainability it is, and should be, dealt with in the same way as any other business problems in order for it to be normalised, i.e. become an integral part of doing business.

Most respondents expressed the view that only a limited number of senior executives have a sufficiently broad and deep understanding of the sustainability challenges relevant to their organisational context, but that there is sufficient awareness of the importance of the issues to garner senior-level support for some form of sustainability leadership development to be offered. The form that this provision takes reflects a wide spectrum of leadership development practices, from formal, structured and planned interventions to more informal, unstructured and responsive efforts.

Four Categories of Leadership Development Practice

The spectrum of practices covered in the research falls broadly into four categories: leadership engagement, employee awareness, champion empowerment, and executive development.

¹⁷ Courtice, P., 2013, *ibid*.

i. Leadership Engagement

Most respondents agreed that sustainability needs to be integral to the organisation and its strategy, rather than be a 'bolt-on' response. For this to be really effective, strong leadership from the top, with buy-in from the CEO and at least some of the Board or Executive Committee, was held to be essential. This finding is consistent with previous research we have conducted on sustainability leadership¹⁸. In practice, however, this 'commitment in principle' seldom translates into formal leadership programmes on sustainability. Rather, leaders find themselves 'learning by doing', i.e. through engaging with the sustainability issues most relevant to their sector, by entering into strategic partnerships to try to respond to these issues, and by keeping track of what their competitors are doing in this space.

ii. Employee Awareness

For some, notions of sustainability are constructs similar to health and safety that need to be deeply embedded in corporate culture – into the DNA of 'how the company does things' – if they are to be fully embraced. This requires support from training and development professionals throughout the organisation and from outside to provide operational knowledge and skills that build awareness and foster cultural change. Mostly, this is a communications process that raises employees' awareness of sustainability-related policies, procedures and projects in the organisation. Institutions like the CSR Academy – a collaborative initiative led by Business in the Community that provides training, support and advice on corporate responsibility – are also set up to specifically respond to this need.

iii. Champion Empowerment

Other respondents suggested that integration of sustainability requires 'champions' who have a sufficient grasp of the wider context, who can engage at the right level in the organisation, and who can translate or demystify sustainability challenges into context relevant for executives and employees, including working with professionals across the organisation to drive any vision and strategy into organisational systems. This finding supports a rich vein of academic literature on sustainability champions, which finds these are 'individuals [who] convince and enable organisation members to turn [social and] environmental issues into successful corporate programs and innovations', by identifying, packaging and selling these issues to their colleagues and leaders¹⁹. These champions tend to need formal training and development that enhances their specialist knowledge on sustainability for their sector, as well as connecting them to various in-house and cross-sector initiatives and networks.

¹⁸ Visser, W. & Courtice, P., 2011, Sustainability Leadership: Linking Theory and Practice, *SSRN Working Paper Series*, 21 October 2011.

¹⁹ Andersson, L. M. & Bateman, T. S., 2000, Individual environmental initiative: Championing natural environmental issues in U.S. business organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(4): 548-570.

iv. Executive Development

Many respondents, particularly those in the sustainability function, positioned the notion of sustainability as an aspirational and continuously evolving state, i.e. a strategic destination that will never be reached. This idea is echoed in the literature by scholars who conclude that 'sustainability is aspirational in nature, a meta-ideal, one inherently infused with societal values of justice, integrity, reverence, respect, community and mutual prosperity'²⁰. By implication, this requires responses that are different from conventional management and leadership development practices.

According to our respondents, this might include, for example, developing a more comprehensive perspective on emerging environmental and social trends, taking a longer-term view and looking beyond the short-term market context, grappling with dynamic sustainability challenges and opportunities that introduce hitherto unknown complexity and requirements for managing change, engaging with a wider range of stakeholders than are traditionally considered, collaborating with others in new and complex partnerships, and framing different perspectives on business models for growth.

²⁰ Wheeler, D., Colbert, B., & Freeman, R. E., 2003, Focusing on value: Corporate social responsibility, sustainability and a stakeholder approach in a network world. *Journal of General Management*, 28(3): 1-28.

Seven Key Characteristics of Sustainability Leaders

These findings are similar to those of previous research by CISL²¹, which identified seven key characteristics of sustainability leaders that need to be nurtured:

1. Systemic understanding
2. Emotional intelligence
3. Values orientation
4. Compelling vision
5. Inclusive style
6. Innovative approach
7. Long-term perspective

While these characteristics are not unique to sustainability leaders, there was general endorsement that taken together they make leaders more effective in responding to sustainability challenges. There was also acknowledgement that not all of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to tackle sustainability challenges can be developed through traditional, mainstream leadership development programmes. However, several modes of formal leadership development did emerge from the interviews and are explored below.

Different Modes of Leadership Development

Activities within the executive development offerings in the companies surveyed include

- i. **Attendance at events and conferences**, where typically senior leaders attend as presenters and absorb knowledge from their immediate co-presenters and high-level networking. Champions on the other hand are more likely to attend as delegates, gathering useful information and networking with other professionals.
- ii. **More structured learning programmes** tend to be smaller, and more intimate and interactive. At the strategic level, examples include peer to peer leadership programmes such as the Prince of Wales's Business & Sustainability Programme, which are open to cross sector international participants, while other companies commission customised programmes for senior leadership teams or intact work groups. Sustainability champions are more likely to attend more specialised programmes, ranging from Master's-level degrees to short courses for practitioners (e.g. on GRI reporting, environmental auditing, or supply chain management).
- iii. **'Learning by doing'** is increasingly attractive as a means of capacity building in companies. This typically requires top leadership commitment and brokering, while the capacity building takes place at the level of the expert participants.

²¹ **Courtice, P.**, 2011, The Challenge to Business as Usual, A Journey Of A Thousand Miles: The State Of Sustainability Leadership 2011, CPSL.

Examples include participation in business platforms such as the Cambridge Natural Capital Leaders Platform or the World Business Council for Sustainable Development's (WBCSD) various sector-based and issue-based collaborations. The projects are unlikely to be labelled as leadership development programmes, but nevertheless achieve many of the aims of sustainability leadership development.

- iv. **Experiential learning** is another highly practical and extremely effective form of leadership development, which is increasingly being used. Here, learning is seen as a process of self-discovery, rather than knowledge transfer. Typically, participants are required to respond to a real-world challenge beyond the scope of their experience. It is rarer for top leaders to be put through such a process, although the various Wilderness Leadership Schools and 'vision quest' organisers do occasionally get very senior participants. More typically, champions (or potential champions) are sent as volunteers to work with a charity or social enterprise in an unfamiliar setting. HSBC's collaboration with Earthwatch Institute is a case in point. The key to the effectiveness of such experiential learning programmes is immersion in an unfamiliar and challenging environment that stimulates creative thinking and deep reflection²².

Integration of Leadership Development

Notably, none of these initiatives as they relate to sustainability were characterised by interviewees as extensions of traditional leadership courses or were delivered by conventional providers of leadership development. Some respondents commented that integration of sustainability into mainstream courses would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in the current climate. One respondent suggested that the field of sustainability is emergent and still much too dynamic to be accommodated in such courses; two others thought that mainstream leadership courses from external providers lack in-depth insights into big system trends and an appreciation of how sustainability applies to the specifics of the business.

Most agreed that leadership development for sustainability does not lend itself to an off-the-shelf approach, but rather that it needs to be tailored to the organisation and indeed to individual leaders. This was reinforced by a respondent from a company where training and development is strongly institutionalised. In this company the existing frameworks for development are deeply embedded, making it easy to add relatively generic modules about technical aspects of sustainability, but more difficult for individual executives and employees to work through the implications for their everyday activities.

²² Bradbury, H., 2003, Sustaining inner and outer worlds: A whole-systems approach to developing sustainable business practices in management. *Journal of Management Education*, 27: 172-187.

These comments suggest that while some of the more technical aspects of sustainability may be reasonably easily integrated (such as carbon strategies and stakeholder engagement), the big-picture analysis which contextualises the latest thinking on sustainability challenges and trends, and the implications for an organisation, usually needs to be provided by specialist resources, or at the very least via significant specialist involvement. Respondents were therefore clear that at least for the foreseeable future it is likely that such a responsibility will remain with the sustainability function, with HR taking the lead role in organising the delivery of interventions.

A number of respondents flagged up a concern for how the impact of any intervention is sustained. There was little evidence that the companies had developed strategies to follow up with leaders about how they managed to retain and build on the insights gained from sustainability leadership development intervention in their everyday routines, particularly where it had managed to trigger an emotional and not just intellectual response. At least in part this reflects the relative immaturity of the extent to which sustainability is embedded into standard organisational business processes and thus the need for a more systematic follow-through as part of the development process. Some companies did develop some metrics to monitor performance, but these were still relatively new and limited in range and therefore did not provide sufficient data about the effectiveness of interventions relating to sustainability.

Mediating Factors

Industry Sector

The preliminary findings suggest that there may be substantial differences between different industry sectors as to what is relevant and appropriate by way of responding to sustainability in terms of leadership development. For example, for retail and consumer goods manufacturers' timescales are very short, and according to the respondents from these sectors it is already a challenge to stretch the organisational horizon from one year to three years, let alone the longer time horizons which are needed to address many sustainability challenges.

Business-to-business sector respondents suggested that there is often little pressure for companies to adopt sustainability strategies, as their customers generally only require regulatory compliance and companies in this area do not face the reputational pressures that more public-facing companies experience. Finally, while in heavy industries timescales for investments are relatively long-term, respondents signalled an on-going tension between sustainability and health and safety, where the short-term imperative of the latter could sometimes drive out attention to the former. These findings reinforce prior research

by CISL into how contextual challenges such as current ownership and investment structures and market conditions constrain many corporations' ability to take a longer-term view²³.

Leadership Perspectives

The research showed a marked difference between companies in their interpretation of the notion of leadership. In some companies, anyone with managerial duties or subject expertise is considered to be a leader. Other companies explicitly distinguish between leaders and managers, where leadership is attributed to the top-250 or top-500 executives. There were also contrasts between those that emphasised general leadership requirements – like setting strategy and objectives, or inspiring and supporting staff – and those that emphasised that leadership in action is always situated, i.e. executives are leaders *for* something, and are required to be highly adaptive and responsive to the situational context²⁴.

The tensions between financial performance and wider sustainability objectives revealed another variation in perspectives on leadership. One view argues for a pragmatic approach in responding to pressures through managerial adaptation and organisational incentives, while another view is more rooted in authentic leadership. This latter perspective suggests that incremental adaptation will always be less effective than the advent of the courageous individual leadership that occasionally emerges, or than a change that is triggered by a crisis, which will drive action more quickly and more deeply than any structured process²⁵.

Summary Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the extent to which sustainability is currently integrated into corporate leadership training and development programmes and what barriers and opportunities exist to such integration. The findings allow some preliminary conclusions to be drawn.

1. A strategic approach to sustainability is supported

The study reinforces the argument that only when sustainability is part of the core strategy – and thus directly connected to the practices and performance measurements of executives or leaders – does it become materially relevant in leadership development programmes. Conversely for sustainability to become central to any business strategy it needs to be explicitly addressed in the company's leadership development concepts and processes.

²³ Courtice, P., 2013 (ibid).

²⁴ Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003, The great disappearing act: difficulties in doing "leadership". *Leadership Quarterly* 14: 359–381.

²⁵ Goffee, R. and Jones, G., 2009. Authentic leadership. *Leadership Excellence*, May.

2. Four categories of sustainability leadership development exist - leadership engagement, employee awareness, champion empowerment, and executive development.

Informal approaches to sustainability leadership development – both strategic and operational – have generally, so far, been adopted but not generally recognised as leadership development. Formal approaches have mainly only been applied at the operational level (for sustainability champions), while developing appropriate traits, styles and skills for strategic sustainability leadership has generally not been identified as distinctive or separate from existing executive development programmes.

3. Four modes of sustainability leadership development exist - attendance at events and conferences; structured learning programmes; ‘learning by doing’; experiential learning.

Of the four modes of sustainability leadership development represented in the research, events and programmes are most common, although they vary depending on the level of leadership involvement. Top leaders’ involvement in events is usually linked to the public positioning of the company, while programmes are more likely to be oriented towards policy outcomes. Projects and processes are less common, but create deeper leadership development through operational involvement and collaborative change.

4. Sustainability leadership development remains poorly integrated

Most companies are either managing their sustainability leadership development informally or targeting it at the operational level through sustainability champions. Formal integration of sustainability into the core leadership programmes of companies is rare, although many of the traits, styles and skills needed to lead on sustainability are covered in these programmes as the basic requirements of good leadership.

5. Industry sector and leadership perspectives are mediating factors

The prominence of different sustainability drivers in different sectors is an area where further research is needed to clarify how this relates to leadership development in organisations. How the role of leaders is perceived – especially whether they are expected to play a wider transformational role – is also critical in shaping the approach to sustainability leadership development.

6. Sustainability leadership development is still emerging

As leadership development for sustainability is an emergent field, many of the approaches are still experimental and immature. This study suggests that innovations that stimulate dialogue and collaboration provide the most transformative opportunities for engagement with sustainability on an on-going basis²⁶. This resonates beyond formal leadership

²⁶ For more on the forums available for leaders’ personal engagement in the wider sustainability debate, see **Courtice, P.**, 2013 (ibid).

programmes: these insights can also be applied to staff development programmes throughout organisations, ultimately helping to shape a trajectory of organisational change which allows executives, managers and employees to emerge as leaders for sustainability as and when appropriate, It can also support the development of leaders who can run environmentally and socially sound operations, thereby helping to develop responsible people who can create sustainable value.

Appendix

Research Method

The research design follows an interpretive, phenomenological or constructivist paradigm²⁷. This approach fits well with exploratory studies that use qualitative research to support theory development, rather than theory testing. More specifically, in a corporate sustainability context, the interpretive approach ‘allows for bringing the actors, their emotions, interpretations and actions within the organisation to the fore of the analysis, and for focusing on [sustainability] as an emergent process’²⁸.

We employed two main qualitative research techniques: the focus group and in-depth interviews. In the first instance, a small group of senior executives from the HR and Sustainability functions (at vice-president and senior vice-president level) from eight companies were invited to share their experiences and challenges in leadership training and development for sustainability. The companies were chosen as a stratified convenience sample across a broad range of sectors on the basis that they have a long-standing explicit engagement with sustainability at senior levels of the organisation, and that they have expressed an aspiration to mainstream sustainability in their leadership development process.

The research consisted of a single focus group and personal interviews with 17 individual participants. The four-hour workshop brought together ten participants from the different companies and helped to set the context and scope for the individual interviews. The subsequent interviews explored the dimensions of sustainability leadership particular to individual companies, the specifics of their training programmes, the conditions for further integration of sustainability into those programmes, and examples of best practice. The interviews were semi-structured, lasted on average 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed; participants were informed that their contribution would be kept confidential and non-attributable at all times.

Since publication of this report, the Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership has changed its name to the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership. This has been updated within the report.

²⁷ Esterberg, K. G., 2002, *Qualitative Methods in Social Research*. London: McGraw-Hill.

²⁸ Georg, S., & Fussel, L., 2000, Making Sense of Greening and Organizational Change. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 9(3): 175-185.