Redesigning education programs for business sustainability.

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Summary:
Traditional programs on business sustainability have had limited success. They have a linear underlying assumption that sets up a fixes that fail scenario and results in serious negative unintended consequences. This paper explores the situation and highlights how systems tools could be used to help redesign education programs for business sustainability.

Redesigning education programs for business sustainability

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Traditional education programs

What are they?

- Provide brochures and Case studies

- Offer Training and advice

- Site visits

- Grants for improvement

Underlying assumption:

Project Officers
talk to business

↓

business change and
benefit from doing so

improvements in relationship
between business and
environmentalists

improvements to the
environment

↓

Project ends

The people who design traditional education programs have this linear underlying assumption as to how the project will work. They expect that the Project Officers will talk to business, business will see the light and change, the environment will be protected and the project will end. A nice side benefit will be a better relationship between environmentalists and business.

They fail to realise how complex and difficult change within business is, and they fail to acknowledge all the other issues business are dealing with which means that they may not have time to listen. They also fail to see all the factors that limit business ability to become sustainable (these have been highlighted in another related paper presented at this conference.) In essence they see the project like the bridge in this picture, a smooth transition from one side to the other. They fail to see the waves crashing on the rocks or the individual rivets that hold the bridge together.

Fixes that fail archetype:

unsustainable business

O

S

education program **S**

unintended consequences **S**
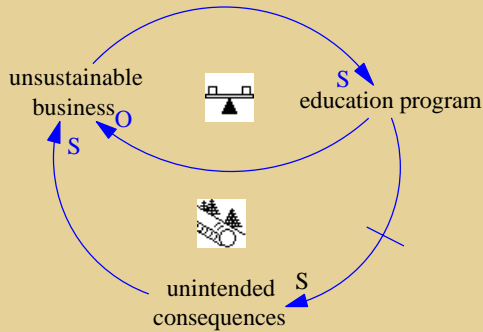
Sets up a fixes that fail archetype

continued fix is more $$$, more case studies

but builds significant unintended consequences

The projects end up being a fixes that fail situation. They are designed to educate business and make them more sustainable. They do make small amounts of progress, that encourages the Project Organisers to think that simply spending more money, providing more case studies and information will further speed up business change. As mentioned they fail to realise the real reasons that business are not sustainable. And in forcing the issue continuously with traditional methods they set up a dangerous situation which leads to many unintended consequences.

Unintended consequences :

- business decide it is too hard / ineffective

- business think environmentalists don't understand them

- breakdown in relationship between business and environmentalists

- frustrated, disillusioned environmentalists who lose enthusiasm

- little improvement in sustainability level of business

- continued need for expensive regulation and law tightening

- loss of commitment from government and funding bodies who pay for projects

- loss of potential benefits to business

All because they've failed to understand the system surrounding business sustainability. The project set up to advance sustainability actually slows down progress.

How systems tools can help:

- Identifying and addressing mental models

Business Mental Models	Educators Mental Models
– Sustainability is a hassle, a cost for business	–business will want to change
– it's too hard, too complicated, too many issues	–we know what's best
– I'll go bankrupt if I do it before my competitors	ex: Greenie v Business language
– I can just move my business overseas	We need to incorporate our needs into their terms, to fit with their mental models.
– Laws aren't being enforced	

There are many mental models involved in sustainable business issues these are just some of them. One of significance is the language used by the Educators, the project officers. In the projects I've been involved in the Project Officers were all relatively new

environmental graduates. They were hired because they were cheap but also because the funding body could gain public relations benefits from saying they were supporting youth. These people naturally spoke in a 'green' rather than a business language. They went to business and talked to them about cleaner production, zero emissions and other programs that offered great benefits to business. But to many businesses these terms are foreign, they are seen as side issues, not core business and certainly not necessary for survival. Yet when you review management terms the same issues could have been described using strategic planning, process improvement, value adding- items that are seen as core business and may have resulted in more positive responses from business. The Project Officers needed to understand the mental models of business and to design their programs to meet those models.

How systems tools can help:

Using Influence Diagramming / CLD to:
• help understand the system
• help identify all stakeholders and their needs
• help explain the education methods chosen to project funders

Using Learning Environments to:
• let Managers and other stakeholders explore the issues
• trial solutions in a safe, non-threatening environment
• see the impact of different mental models and alter them

Using other tools like the ST pyramid to:
• help people understand interconnection, behaviour over time

The need for change management:

Systems thinking and system dynamics result in greater understanding and perhaps commitment to act but not necessarily change

- change attempts fail 90% of the time

- blame issue not self

- need to incorporate change management practices
  - stakeholder analysis, managing resistance, communication
  - similar to Learning Organisation concepts

Systems Thinking and System Dynamics can help us to redesign our education programs to be more effective in helping our target audience understand sustainability and why they should change. They however will not necessarily result in getting that change.

Change management within business is very difficult and complex. Often we come across business managers who agree with the principles of sustainability and want to change but don't because it is too hard to deal with all the internal issues. There are also those who have tried and failed, they unfortunately blame sustainability methods and assume they are flawed rather than realising it is their implementation that was flawed. This is what happens with management theories leading to the cynicism of management fads that don't work and come and go.

In order to address that we need to incorporate change management principles into our education programs as well. In some ways this is similar to the learning organisation concepts that have sprung up from systems thinking. To educators who do not think systemically it may seem outside of the scope of a business sustainability project to consider such things but if they want to achieve their goals they need to.

Conclusion

- Traditional education programs for business sustainability have resulted in several counterintuitive outcomes
- Incorporating Systems Thinking and System Dynamics can result in greater understanding by business managers and willingness to become involved but may not result in on the ground change
- There is a need to link change management into such programs as well.

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