

Sustaining the Latest Management Fad

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Abstract

Management theories and fads come and go, some stay and some are forgotten. A current issue in management and leadership is sustainability, originally referring to the environment, and now the economy, but ultimately to the organization as well as individuals. Identifying sustainability is first dealt with by asking questions, such as how can you sustain your job, your work, your career, which is different than improving your performance or changing jobs and organizations. The likelihood of sustainability of this new management/leadership theory is somewhat increased due to the involvement and concern of individuals throughout the world. Ideas on establishing the concept in organizations and the workplace are reflected in this paper.

The Development of Management Theories

For decades management has been significantly influenced by various ideas and theories, sometimes referred to as “fads.” Such fads have included the ideas of scientific management (Taylor, 1911), management by objectives (Drucker, 1954), one minute management (Blanchard, 1982), customer service (Albrecht, 1985), total quality management (Deming, 1988), the learning organization (Senge, 1990), liberation management (Peters, 1992), process re-engineering (Hammer, 1993), open book management (Case, 1995), and an abundance of others. Many of these were based upon studies and surveys of companies by individuals focused on identifying ways for organizations to improve management and support organizational growth and development. Each of the theories contained kernels of truth that added value to management practice in both profit and non-profit organizations. Despite the effort and initial enthusiasm related to the use of such ideas, the search for excellence has continued for years looking for the one theory that will provide the best answer to all management practices and organizational concerns.

Part of the problem that awaits anyone with such hope is the reality that most management theories are imposed on employees and organizations by managers rather than coming from employees and being accepted by management. Consequently, employees needed to be educated about the theories and trained in their use of new concepts despite their reluctance in changing how they work. Even when the evidence for change is clear and obvious, such as in the movement from onsite classroom training to online learning for example, many individuals are reluctant to let go of what has worked for years in the performance of their jobs.

Another part of the problem is the idea that new ways of doing things are primarily intended to benefit the organization more than the individual employee. Such thinking by employees increases their reluctance to use the new ideas unless they discover some personal value in changing their way of working. The lack of complete commitment to new ideas often leads to incomplete understanding and half-hearted acceptance of the theory, ultimately resulting in an eclectic approach to adopting only those ideas that make sense and are easy to implement.

A Bottom-Up Approach to Management

What is more likely to lead to effective use of new management theories is the conviction by workers that such ideas have value and are already accepted as necessary even before management considers their use in business, education and government. Such may be the case for the latest theory of sustainability, an idea that has been developing for several decades supported by the reality of diminishing resources and wastefulness in using those resources, particularly energy and water.

Many individuals at home as well as in their communities are already conserving the use of water and measuring their use of electricity in the home, often directed and supported by government regulations requiring changes in their living habits as well as in their work. Similar regulations for businesses and other organization are becoming more common with each passing month. Most of the concerns and directives are focused on the environment to be managed by all organizations in the workplace as well as by most individuals in their homes and communities. An abundance of resource information for both individuals and companies is available online from government agencies, businesses and institutions, and personal blogs.

Waves of Sustainability

Moving from personal responsibility for sustaining the environment to identifying ways for leaders and managers to sustain organizations presents a new direction of care and concern relevant to the sustainability of the environment, the economy, and the organization. As in all development, various phases or stages identify the process of change that takes place when implementing new ideas and theories. Dunphy, Griffiths and Benn (2009) have identified six phases and three waves for “charting possible paths forward.”

Waves of Sustainability - Organizational
First Wave
Rejection – Opposition
Non-Responsiveness – Ignorance
Second Wave
Compliance – Risk
Efficiency – Cost
Strategic Proactivity – Competitive Advantage
Third Wave
The Sustaining Corporation – Transformation

Rejection focuses on the exploitation by a firm that uses resources for profit and economic gain. Non-responsiveness identifies a stage of ignorance about the necessity of change. Compliance emphasizes activity that avoids or lessens the likelihood of sanctions and penalties. Efficiency indicates a change in the wasting of resources to better management of such resources. Strategic proactivity includes the concept of sustainability as a competitive advantage in organizational strategy and planning identified as a significant component of “corporate citizenship.” All of which lead to the sixth stage of the sustaining corporation - a concept internalized by all workers within the organization.

Stages of Personal Participation

Getting from the stage of disinterest or unbelief to the stage of realization and internalization is likely to be much easier when individuals have already started that journey through their own acceptance of the need to care for the environment as well as sustain their own life and work in a global world. That process of change can be identified for individuals as follows.

The initial stage reveals an unexamined mentality surrounded by disinterest and irrelevance indicative of an acceptance of the current state of wastefulness. Stage two focuses on an examined reflection reviewing arguments for sustaining the environment. Whether such arguments are accepted or rejected, such knowledge leads to an increased awareness of the problem. These first two phases can be identified as survival stages.

Stage three is characterized by initial support demonstrated by individual actions, particular issues and specific practices for lessening wastefulness and recycling materials as an obligatory response to current concerns. This phase is known as the supportive stage.

Stage four is identified as the phase of commitment based on a sense of personal relevance and concern for seeking ways for sustaining the environment around the home as well as in the community. Stage five is the stage of global commitment focused on developing strategies and taking action on concerns and issues relevant to sustaining one's personal and professional life as well as the organization one is associated with. These last two phases can be described as sustaining stages.

Stages of Sustainability - Individual
Survival Stage
Unexamined Mentality – Disinterest in the Irrelevance of Sustainability
Examined Reflection – Reviewing Arguments on Sustainability
Supporting Stage
Initial Actions – Lessening Wastefulness and Recycling Materials
Commitment – Personal Responsibility for Seeking Ways of Sustainability
Sustaining Stage
Global Commitment – Strategies for Sustaining Professional + Organizational Life

The Top-Down Approach to Sustainability

Integrating the concept of sustainability throughout the organization requires direction and support from upper management. Vision and mission statements must include sustainability as a key strategy in the identification of the organization and the business of the company. Without such a focus it is unlikely that sustainability practices will become much of a reality in many organizations. What is basically needed is a change in culture within the enterprise. Management needs to learn how to implement a variety of new practices to develop commitment to sustainability as presented in the company's vision and mission statements.

How does one move employees from a point of indifference to a place of commitment? While change occurs in many ways, oftentimes the most effective changes occur through communications and relationships with others reinforced by assessments about one's job development, employment security, career opportunities, family responsibilities, economic

situation and community obligations. The latter can be compared to the idea of “keeping up with the neighbors” who live simply and control wastefulness. A poor economy causes individuals and families to cut back on spending, buying only things that are necessary, and living within their income. Focusing on ideas and strategic plans of the organization can move employees to concentrate more on their work and work more effectively to achieve the goals of the organization by aligning their work with those objectives. Connecting with people through social networking and travel to other countries increasing awareness of more simple ways of life richly filled with family and other relationships can also cause people to consider what is of most value in life despite the call of consumerism common in the United States.

The key factor is that once individuals gain an awareness of the importance of sustainability in their lives, work and family, it becomes much easier for managers to build upon that appreciation in moving employees to work toward sustaining both the organization and the world wherever the business of the company leads or personal concern develops. On a macro level, Garbage City in Cairo, Egypt is a good example of how environmental sustainability can lead to a more productive and fruitful life for anyone involved in eliminating waste and managing resources effectively. On a micro level, using two-sided copying of papers and reports can reduce both paper and expenses by nearly 50 percent. Such realities move beyond a management fad to a lifestyle of care and concern for people and places, resources, communities and organizations.

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