
Sustainability is being recognized, of late, as a sound business strategy, and Werbach's is a work that demonstrates why and how.

We understand the essence of sustainability by looking at the definition of Sustainable Development, and The Brundtland Commission of the UN (in 1987) gives one of the best definitions for the term: sustainable development is one that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Today, we see forward-looking businesses embracing Sustainability as a part of their corporate responsibility and/or as a part of their strategy while businesses caught in the current way of doing business still wonder what is so great about it and why should it be given a thought. Adam Werbach's work can enlighten the second segment by explaining how the first set is using it as strategy and why that should be the way forward.

Bob Willard, in a series of works-both books and DVDs (The Sustainability Advantage, The Next Sustainability wave, The Business Case for Sustainability etc. Refer: www.sustainabilityadvantage.com) has affirmed the 'business case' for Sustainability by emphasizing how Sustainability has clear business benefits; Werbach now takes the pitch a little further and demonstrates, with lively examples, how it should be treated as a strategy and what are its basic tenets.

The story of how Werbach, an environmental activist, who, at the age 23 in 1996 was elected the youngest national president of the Sierra Club (the oldest and largest environmental organization in the United States), turned into a Sustainability Strategist is an interesting one. The book starts with this story: back in 1997, Werbach, met the mayor of New Orleans and tried to explain to him, how ignoring the loss of wetlands in New Orleans could spell a danger, since wetlands absorb excess water from storms and floods. The mayor did not reciprocate with any understanding or action. Then, when Katrina hit in 2005 and caused a huge devastation, Werbach felt he had failed as an environmentalist.

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Here, she reviews a recent book published in July 2009 by Harvard Business Press, written by Adam Werbach, a young, brilliant thought leader specializing in Sustainability—which is a futuristic management strategy.
The social and cultural ramifications of the episode also convinced him that being an environmentalist does not suffice. One needs a strategy to include economic, social, environmental and cultural impacts, and this inclusive strategy needs to be impressed upon organizations and individuals to act in a responsible way. Since then, he has turned a strategist.

The Triple Bottomline Thinking (originally propounded by John Elkington, in his 1987 book ‘Cannibals with Forks..’), now being embraced by several progressive companies, recommends tracking and reporting not only on Economic impacts but also on Social Impacts. Werbach’s view insists on including Cultural aspects as the fourth aspect.

To illustrate the difference between a mere competitive strategy caught in current mould and a sustainability strategy that’s futuristic, he presents the cases of Toyota and the Big Three automobile manufacturers of the US (GM, Ford and Chrysler). The Big Three reeled under the pressure of the financial crisis and the oil hike, and had to go to the US Congress begging the American tax payer for a bailout. Werbach reminds us how the three had ignored to invest in the future, focused on gas guzzling vehicles and current, short term profits from them, how they did not spend on futuristic technology and hence paid the price—literally as well—when the oil price rocketed. He contrasts that with Toyota which integrated sustainability in its strategy, developed a ‘Toyota way’ that was value-based, people-centric and futuristic, invested in hybrid fuel technology long back, introduced hybrid cars and offered excellent quality even in entry-level small cars— which the myopic US automakers ignored while focusing on large vehicles. Today, Toyota’s strategy has paid off because it was based on Sustainability thinking. A Chinese proverb says the best time to plant a tree is a hundred years ago, Werbach tells us!

Werbach warns us, and rightly so, that, in the days to come, time available for strategic planning is going to get shorter and shorter. No time to get ready and aim. You just have the time to fire. Integrating Sustainability in your strategy is going to get your shots in the right direction. He also reminds us-who are steeped in the linear thinking of current management curricula—that strategy is essentially nonlinear. And guess what’s the starting point for beginning a strategic exercise? A SWOT? Scenario Planning or some such thing? No, the place to begin is none of the traditionally recommended steps, but setting what he calls a ‘North Star’ goal: having a North Star goal is all about having a purpose larger than mere profits—embracing global challenges and aiming to solve them, aligning solutions with your core strengths. That is the first step of forming the sustainable strategy. Because, global issues shape the future markets, the future employees, vendors and all stakeholders. If the world has to support an additional 3 billion people by 2040, then the market dynamics are surely going to change immensely, and today’s organizations must understand the shifts well, and play their part in shaping them favourably. This is indeed a really long term strategy.

He dedicates three chapters to explain what he calls TEN cycle as the crux of the execution of the strategy: TEN stands for Transparency, Engaging and Networking. Breaking away from the all-familiar SWOT analysis and the PASTEL analysis (Politics, Environment, Society, Technology, Economy, Legal framework), he advocates STaR mapping (analysis on social changes, technological, resource changes) to map opportunities in the new era.

Finally, he deals with what is perhaps the most important lever in this transformation: leadership. Leadership is crucial to both envisioning the strategy and ensuring its execution. He says how leaders should lead by letting go, and offers the example of Anne Mulcahy, the Xerox CEO who transformed...
the company to a sustainable one that reuses and remanufactures its products. How leaders should think of next generations is illustrated by the apt example of the founder of Seventh generation, Jeffrey Hollander, who set up the household products company that considers the impact of decisions on the next seven generations.

Built to Last: successful habits of visionary companies, a book by James Collin and Jerry Porras (2002) had made waves, of sorts, by digging into the success secrets of 16 organisations that were, well, ‘built to last’. While the essence of the secrets may remain true, and the companies have ‘lasted’ of course, Werbach points out how, six out of those 18 have by now have failed to face challenges or are struggling to do so because they lacked a sustainability strategy. Sony, Motorola, Ford, Boeing, Merck and Citibank form the struggling pack from the list.

Not just the rationale for integrating sustainability into strategy, and not just ideas on how to make it happen, but Werbach also gives us an insightful peek into the sustainability thinking behind the successful transformations/growth of companies such as Xerox, Clorox, P&G, Interface, Timberland, Seventh generation and others.

Werbach’s book is full of these examples and cases that make a point about sustainability as a strategy. He doesn’t just ‘pepper’ his book with these examples but truly integrates them well within his argument for a strategy for sustainability. Go through www.strategyforsustainability.com for details about the man, his work and his blog.