

SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

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VOICE OF EXPERIENCE: EDUCATION



Dr. Jodi Smith is expert in strategies for educating people to change their behaviour in relation to the environment. Among her many projects are studies of what approaches are most effective to ensure business and government implementation of environmental safeguards⁷.

What works, and what does not?

The methods that many educators use are effective in raising awareness, but not in obtaining behaviour change. This became clear to me personally working with 1500

businesses in the 'Changing Streams Pollution Reduction Project'. A wide range of techniques were used including brochures and case studies, site visits and audits, seminars and training, grants, awards, and other forms of recognition. We published regular newspaper articles and educated the public to support those businesses that were taking action. We started an industrial resource exchange helping the companies to use each other's waste as raw resources. The outcome was well short of the aims. There were knowledge and attitude outcomes, but relatively little change in practices. So I began more intensive research to find out what works and why.

If I was trying to introduce a sustainable practice into business, or government, what would you tell me to do?

That you must involve your staff throughout the whole initiative. They need to understand why the change is important, why it will be worthwhile, and how to do it. They must believe that it is achievable. They should have the opportunity to ask questions and suggest options for action. Together you should choose the steps you will take to implement the change, when it will occur and how. This way the staff will have some commitment to the change and be motivated to do it. If this does not occur staff are likely to simply resist or ignore the initiative.

I would also tell you to carefully consider what level of action you want to take. There are many different possibilities for making your business more sustainable. I see sustainability not as an end point to reach, but as a journey. The end point continues to move as technology and our capabilities improve. Best practice is typified by a business whose management and staff are doing as much as is possible for their industrial sector at any particular point in time while also researching how to improve practices further.

⁷ For details, the web site is <www.une.edu.au/cwpr/people/Jodi.html>.

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In your thesis⁸ you consider interventions targeting outcomes from simple reactive changes, to holistic proactive ones. Can businesses choose the level they want?

Yes they can, but it is important to realise that over time each business will need to implement the more complex sustainability approaches. Business personnel will be pressured to do so by stricter regulations; customer, investor and community demands; bank and insurance company policy requirements; competitor cost savings and marketing advantages; and market access pressures, to mention a few.

If business wants initiatives to succeed it requires creating a learning organisation or change-supportive culture. This means you need to ensure that staff members have time allocated to learn about the changes, to implement them, measure their impact and refine them. They have to be encouraged to admit when something isn't working or when they don't know what to do. Any mistakes or problems that occur need to be seen as learning opportunities so that staff members feel safe enough to admit to them. If a safe space is not made staff members are unlikely to risk making the changes or suggesting improvements for fear of the consequences. If you really want them to bring energy to the project it's also advisable to provide forms of recognition and reward for their efforts.

Let's say you were given such a project. Tell me the steps you would go through, and highlight the things that you think would be essential to success?

This is an adapted version of John Kotter's eight-step approach to leading change.

Step 1: Establish a sense of urgency, making sure that people understand why it is essential to change.

Step 2: Create a guiding coalition of people who do care about what you are trying to achieve, and get them to lead the change.

Step 3: Develop a vision and strategy, based on understanding the people in the organisation. We would set ourselves specific goals, and make sure that we have the ability to achieve them, and then work hard to have everyone commit to them.

Step 4: Communicate the change vision and continue spreading the word about sustainability. Everyone should know what we are doing, how we are doing it and where we are up to. Making sure that people stay informed and feel a part of the process is important.

Step 5: Empower broad-based action. I'd ensure that people have time to work on the issues. I'd promote the process as one of continuous improvement. I'd ensure that individuals were not blamed if things went wrong. We would look for the systemic reasons that led to the problem and change the system to prevent it reoccurring.

Step 6: Create and celebrate short-term wins. By having wins throughout the process it helps to keep people motivated and committed to the project. I would ensure that all stakeholders know the wins we are making. It's important that wins are celebrated not just documented.

Step 7: Consolidate gains and produce more change. I'd keep communicating about the issue and our progress to ensure that staff and management stay focused on it.

Step 8: Anchor new approaches into the culture. Ideally I would ensure that the people who are hired or promoted are advocates for sustainability. I'd ensure that reporting on sustainability initiatives is included in all staff meetings. The staff of each

8 Redesign of government sustainability education programs for business personnel – from awareness raising to changing behaviour, University of New England 2004.

department or work area should be working to improve their own practices as well as being a part of the larger initiative. I would conduct regular surveys of staff to identify any needs that they have, any barriers to the process that exist and take action to remove them. This may involve changing policies and structures in support of sustainability.

Given this organisational change focused and systemic approach, what should government or other sustainability strategists think about when they approach these change issues?

There is no simple, quick fix. Getting any audience or targeted stakeholder group to change their behaviour requires significant commitment of resources and time. It requires a multi-faceted approach.

Most government initiatives I have evaluated have involved one or two focuses. They may have focused on legislation and penalties or on awareness raising and case study development. Some tried grants and incentives while others tried developing voluntary codes of practice. There has rarely been a coordinated approach.

Awareness raising on its own has proven to result in little behaviour change. Likewise a reliance on legislation and penalties has been shown not only to achieve little behaviour change, but it has often led to a reluctance in business personnel to work together with the government in the future or to move beyond basic compliance. Similarly, the use of emotional appeals to protect the environment for its own sake, with wonderful images of animals and plants, has had limited impact on behaviour. Why? I believe that it is because on their own these approaches do not address the specific beliefs that the targeted stakeholders hold. They do not identify or remove the barriers to change that they may face or explain how to and help them to implement the changes to their practices. The initiatives do not meet the targeted stakeholders needs.

In order for sustainability strategists or government staff to be successful with their efforts they need to work with the targeted stakeholders. They have to find out what the targeted stakeholders believe, what barriers to change they face and what support they need. They should then design their policy and programs to meet these. This can only be achieved through participative problem solving and focused education and policy approaches. In essence they have to ensure that their efforts help the targeted stakeholders to see why the issue is important, why it is worthwhile for them to take action, and that they can successfully implement the changes. They have to believe it is achievable.

This suggests that a wide range of policy and education approaches should be used. Individual tools or approaches can be seen as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, each of them is an important part of the picture, but it is only when they are all brought together that the picture is complete. Likewise the various policy and education approaches can be seen as complementary. We need legislation and enforcement, we need incentives and role models, we need awareness raising and consumer pressure, but we also need training and coaching of the targeted stakeholders, not only in sustainability methods, but also in the skills of leading change. We need to make it as easy as possible for business personnel or any targeted stakeholder group to change their behaviour.

There are lots of educational initiatives taking place but they do not seem to have a major impact. Is this because they are too simplistic, or just not resourced?

I believe that in order to make it easy, we need to actually look at not only the educational and policy methods that we use but also our organisational structures. At the moment there are many different agencies and government departments that are each running education programs and other initiatives on a wide range of different environment related topics: water, air and soil pollution; biodiversity; climate change; and waste management to mention a few. Targeted stakeholder groups such as business personnel and residents are bombarded with information from different agencies and do not know who to listen to or what to do first. The government programs compete against each other and minimise their own success.

In order to remedy this, I believe we should have a whole-of-government approach with a single government sustainability program that addresses all issues. This way the targeted stakeholders would only have one person or agency to listen to or to contact when they want help. Local Agenda 21 attempts to do this at the local level, however at the State and federal level there are many different agencies involved, all spending significant amounts of money on projects. A lot more could be achieved if these funds were combined and used to produce a single, multi-faceted, whole-of-government education and assistance program that helped the targeted stakeholders to address their needs, built their capacity to take action and coached them with their efforts.

The three levels of government could still be involved just having specific roles to reduce duplication and maximise effectiveness. For instance the federal government sustainability agency could research sector specific solutions, work to alter federal legislation and market conditions to encourage targeted stakeholders to take action, and finance mass-media awareness raising campaigns. The State government could deliver training to local level educators and provide networking and support services to them. In addition to this they could alter their State legislation and the operating conditions within their State to make it as important and worthwhile for the targeted stakeholders to take action. While local government would actually work with the business personnel to implement the changes – to make them achievable.

Are there any other things you want to bring out?

I'd like to reemphasise that all the different policy mechanisms are required to make it as important and worthwhile as possible for the targeted stakeholders to take action. Problem solving focused education methods and coaching can then be used to make it as easy as possible for the targeted stakeholders to achieve the changes. It is my opinion that no single mechanism will be effective on its own. They are all important pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.