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Strategic Thinking

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Becoming Sustainable: Tools and Resources for Successful Organizational Transformation

Don't get me wrong: I have nothing against the "sweethearts" of green enterprise, the "Patagonias" and the "Whole Foods Markets" of our world, built from the very start on a solid foundation of sustainability values and principles. Yet, with all due respect, I often feel that they almost have it easy -- and it is the traditional companies striving to transform into greener versions of themselves, that are up against a real challenge. Of course, it is an immense task to build the world's best vacuum cleaner, but just imagine what it would take to transform that working vacuum cleaner into the world's best TV set? Oh, my...!

So, if you are considering this hefty task, what is out there to make the transition smoother? For the longest time, green business community has been more concerned with the "what," rather than the "how" of sustainability, whereby issues of implementation remained in a big black box. Thankfully, in the recent years the how-to resources for transforming into a profitable green business have been emerging all around. From well-established guidelines of the Natural Step Framework to the emerging uses of Appreciative Inquiry, there are tools for you to use every step of the way:

Step #1: Figure out what sustainable business might mean to you.

'Greening' an existing business is particularly tricky because the transformation must happen without a significant impact on daily operations. The good news is that you can do it one baby step at the time, customizing your path all the way. A number of established frameworks offer starting points to pick and choose from.

The Natural Step Framework ([PDF](#)) offers four scientifically grounded core principles for realigning an organization with ideas of sustainable development. Balancing ecological and social aspirations, Sweden-based TNS has allowed companies like Interface, Inc, IKEA, and Nike, Inc. to develop strategic plans for decreasing dependence on extracted resources, redesigning products and process to addressing needs of people worldwide, and much more.

While rarely treated as a resource or a framework, Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes ([DJSI](#)) offer perhaps the most explicit and well-established blueprints for creating a green company. Tracking financial performance of the leading sustainability-prone companies worldwide, DJSI uses comprehensive [criteria and weightings](#) to assess opportunities and risks realized from economic, social, and environmental performance of a company. Not only do these criteria offer specific areas for improving the level of greenness of your company, but they also suggest the importance of a particular area relative to the company's overall financial performance. Now, that is how-to at its best!

Step #2: Engage your company.

Once general concepts of sustainability get more tailored to the needs and wants of your company, it is time to work out implementation details. Companies take different routes for engaging their functions and departments - and various tools, such as [World Café](#) or [Future Search](#), exist to accomplish this task. However, one tool stands out when it comes to mobilizing the company and its many stakeholders.

Appreciative Inquiry ([AI](#)), a philosophy and methodology for large-scale organizational change, has been celebrated in the Organizational Development world for more than two decades. Recently this methodology has been used to introduce and enhance 'greening' efforts in business. Appreciative Inquiry engages "the whole system", whereby a company's many stakeholders come together in structured dialogue and action planning aimed at scaling up organizational strengths and engaging the entire system rapidly. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, which [made it to number one](#) on the list of Business Ethics Magazine 100 Best Corporate Citizens of 2006, has been using Appreciative Inquiry for its sustainability needs since 2003. [Fairmount Minerals](#), a newcomer to the sustainability world, ran its first whole-company AI summit in 2005, realigning its strategy from a focus on liquidity to a focus on long-term value.

Step #3: Stay with it.

As the train sets in motion, and the dust of initial excitement settles, it becomes crucial to keep things moving. Just as it is in personal life, having a support infrastructure ready to catch you during small stumbles and big confusions is extremely important. Sustainability implementation support groups are popping up across the nation and across the globe. Some of industries biggest names come together under the umbrella of Society for Organizational Learning Sustainability Consortium ([SoL](#)), which allows members like Unilever, Coca-Cola, Seventh Generation, and Schlumberger to exchange ideas, tackle common issues, and join forces around particular solutions. And the power of support groups is not exclusive to large companies. Small and medium enterprises of North East Ohio get the same benefits through Sustainability Implementation Group run by [Entrepreneurs for Sustainability](#), where participating companies co-develop new revenue streams, learn new technologies, and visit each other's facilities to get hands-on experience with sustainable operations.

So, the good news is that there is plenty of resources and collective desire to share them. The bad news is that creating a sustainable company is not only a road less traveled, but a rather steep hike. Interface, Inc. [puts it best](#): "Sustainability is hard work. Becoming a sustainable enterprise is like climbing a mountain that is "higher than Everest." For many companies, the first and most difficult step on that climb is not on the mountain itself, but rather admitting that the mountain exists." But when the mountain is taken in full account, the path is designed and prepared for, and the treacherous hike is complete, one can only imagine the view!

[Nadya Zhexembayeva](#) heads up the World Inquiry, an action research project of the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit ([BAWB](#)) at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management. A global effort, the World Inquiry aims to discover and share new ways for business to live in mutual benefit with the earth's ecosystems and the world's societies. Many of the resources and tools featured in this article will be further explored at the [BAWB Forum](#) convened by the United Nations Global Compact, The Academy of Management, and Case Western Reserve University.