

"An Introspective on How to Best Employ
Environmentally Sustainable Business Practices"

The world we live in is effectively driven by design. Global commerce is directed by supply and demand, with demand being driven by consumer wants and needs. Consumers choose which products they desire based on the design-the way something looks, feels, smells, and tastes. Successful businesses know this and capitalize on human desires and emotions to market their products. The sustainability of a product and the company that created it are becoming increasingly important to consumers. Unfortunately in recent years there has been a drastic decline in both the availability of natural resources and the number of natural areas undisturbed by humans. As a result, businesses now have a responsibility to both their customers and to all citizens of the world to develop environmentally sustainable products and practices. With careful consideration of actions and reactions, businesses can successfully implement practices that are beneficial for people, planet, and profit.

The first step in developing sustainable business practices is adopting a systems-thinking perspective. Earth is one giant system, with countless small systems functioning within it. When you think about it, all things natural are systems with a cyclic flow. Take for example, the life cycle of a plant: a seed takes root in the soil, uses water, sun and carbon dioxide to grow into a large plant that continues using water, sunlight, and carbon dioxide to live and grow. When the plant dies, its mass falls into the soil and all of the nutrients that were once in the plant return to the earth. In this cycle, the plant uses resources to live and grow, but after its life is over those resources are returned to the soil to be re-used. The process is cyclic, and beneficial to the whole environment. Once we analyze a natural system, we must ask ourselves, "Why is business and production a linear process?" It is obvious that linear systems do not happen in the natural world, so why should they work in the human technosphere?

Linear production systems are currently the standard means of operation; a product is designed with the idea that it will be purchased, used, and thrown away. However, the definition of sustainability is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Based solely on this definition, it can be said that our current linear production system is not sustainable. We are certainly compromising the needs of future generations by throwing massive quantities of useful metals, plastics, and other materials into landfills where they cannot be re-used. To develop "sustainable" business practices, we must re-assess our businesses with a systems perspective in mind. We can no longer design products to be "thrown away", because eventually there will be no more space to dispose of products we consider to be waste.

Systems thinking requires us to think in a cyclic pattern instead of a linear one. Businesses must assess their products, offices, and practices and ask, "how can we close the loop?" Products should be designed from the start to be re-used or recycled into products that are just as high of quality as the original (not like our current recycling system that down-cycles products into other products of lower quality). Production methods should be re-designed to use only those materials that are good for the planet. The current trend in business is simply to make products that are "less-bad" than those that came before, but to be truly sustainable means creating a completely closed loop and producing things that are actually beneficial to all who come in contact with them.

Until this point, the focus has mostly been on products and objects purchased by consumers. However, being a sustainable business requires more than producing "green" products. The whole business as a unit must take on the goal of closing the loop and only doing things that better the world

as a whole. This includes designing office buildings that minimize energy losses, maximize the use of local climate for internal temperature control, and improves the health of the land it is on and the employees that it houses. Though this sounds like a large undertaking, the answer is again systems thinking. For example, having a "green" roof with plants on top of the building helps to minimize energy loss by insulating the building, helps to sequester carbon dioxide, provide habitat for organisms such as birds and butterflies, and even provide food if it contains edible plants. By using systems thinking, a roof that normally would provide no overall benefit to the community can be converted into a productive mini-ecosystem with numerous benefits.

Sustainability is not something that can be accomplished overnight. It requires a large amount of innovation and change, but the biggest hindrance to the pursuit of sustainability is the current linear model that most businesses adhere to. If business owners and employees can embrace and implement systems thinking in all that they do, we could begin to experience a world in which human productivity and innovation benefits not only humans, but the entire planet surrounding us. If we could create products and processes that actually leave the planet better than we found it, then that is true sustainability.