

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: More and more studies address the impact of economic activities on the environment. Applied to different sectors of goods and services production or consumption, they all converge to the same result: unregulated economic activities driven merely by strict economic criteria such as profit and market share, affect the environment in a serious and irreversible manner. These findings imply increased responsibility on the part of companies, both to consumers and the general public, as well as to future generations. My article aims to highlight the importance of communicating sustainability in an efficient manner and to provide a series of landmarks that will render it more effective.

Keywords: sustainability, efficient communication, interdepartmental communication, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Effective communication is a fundamental part of the business environment providing an essential link between people and supporting relationships. The lack of communication in a company affects productivity and creates barriers to business development. Effective communication eliminates misunderstandings, confusion and downtime that generate delays. When people communicate effectively in the workplace, they are more productive because they know what they are supposed to do.

Sustainability, defined as the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development), has become a permanent topic. Social concern for environmental issues has been growing exponentially in recent years. The public has become increasingly sensitive to issues related to waste management, recycling, sustainable development, clean production, corporate responsibility, or product lifecycle.

This article is part of Leonardo da Vinci's Leadership and Sustainability Innovation Research and Transfer Project LLP-LdV / TOI / 2013 / RO / 022. The objective of the project is to integrate the existing knowledge about sustainability and to transfer it to administration and industry. The project aims to help organizational leaders and employees understand the strategic implications of sustainability and encourage them to propose creative and innovative approaches. As a result of the project, course modules have been developed in four languages (English, French, Romanian, Slovenian). Following this program, students will be able to certify their skills and competences within the European Qualification and Association (ECQA).

In this article, we provide some preliminary elements that underpin the qualification and certification program for the sustainability management specialist. We will analyze in particular the communication skills that this position entails, both within and outside the organization with partners, institutions, and the media.

2. Effective communication

A survey based on the responses from more than 1,000 employees at Fortune 1000 companies revealed found that workers send and receive about 1800 messages each day via telephone, email, faxes, papers, memos and face to face communication. The average manager spends about 75 to 80 percent of his day engaged in oral or written communication, about 45 minutes every hour (Piombino, 2013). On the other hand, employees retain only 50 percent of communicated information, and supervisors only 60 percent. In oral communication, around 30 percent of the information is lost in each transmission.

In the beginning was the word, and this is equally true for companies that want to introduce sustainable development based on clean production, resource and waste management, product life cycle, corporate social responsibility, and so on. All of these concepts are not obvious, they must be explained so that they can be understood and applied within a company. Communication is the instrument that can transform words, concepts into actions. Communication skills are of utmost importance in a company, especially for management positions, the public relations and the customer service department. The number of verbal and written interactions, messages, mails, etc. have increased dramatically, and the workers involved in these departments spend a great deal of time engaged in acts of communication.

There is a proportional relationship between the efficiency of communication in an organization and its economic performance. Communication deficiencies, whether we talk about imprecision, faulty interpretations, redundancies, verbiage, communicational noise, delayed messages or even lack of communication between certain segments, cause poor economic performances. On the contrary, a clear, timely, unambiguous communication, containing only terms that can be easily understood by the recipient, the existence of feedback and the elimination of any sources of irritability will lead to increased productivity. When communication is efficient in a company the employees know from the beginning what their tasks are and what they are supposed to do. Thus, the economic process will not be affected by confusions.

The common barriers to effective communication are:

- Not paying attention to the speaker or allowing to be distracted by the factors that the receiver is unable to control
- Use of technical terms that the listener does not understand
- Use of dialects unknown or only partially known to the listeners
- Physical or technical difficulties related to the good functioning of the communication channel
- Cultural differences, such as those related to the use and interpretation of non-verbal language, gestures, mimics, etc.
- The existence of prejudices, stereotypes, assumptions that affect the perception and correct interpretation of the message

Communicating sustainability, in order to facilitate the implementation of sustainable processes and practices, faces a number of challenges. In order to prevent the difficulties, sustainability needs to be communicated both at the organizational level and also outside the company, to the stakeholders. At least at declarative level, the sustainability, seen as the quality of economic human activities to take place without depleting the available resources and without destroying the environment, is accepted

by most people. In order not to compromise the needs and expectations of future generations, a balance must be established between economic growth and the protection of the environment. We are talking about recycling, finding alternative resources, use of green energy, waste management, product lifecycle, modular production, all of which needs to be implemented at the organizational level, in the economic unit, starting from the product design and up to advertising and marketing. Companies are increasingly assuming the process of educating their clients in their advertising campaigns.

Regarding organizational communication, the current situation is not very optimistic. The data is particularly worrying about interdepartmental communication. A research made by Discovery Consulting Group, Inc. (*Katcher, 2018*) on a population of 60,000 employees revealed that two-thirds of those surveyed consider that the communication between departments in their company is poor. This situation can be countered by developing sustainability communication strategies that inform employees about the benefits of efficient communication and inspire them to change their communication behavior, thus contributing to a better collaboration both within departments and between departments.

In this perspective, Anne Boyle (2015) proposes a communication strategy that could enhance the employee collaboration, while facilitating the implementation of sustainable processes. The strategy comprises several steps that are supposed to determine the employees to actively participate in environmental programs and contribute to initiatives:

- Goals must be clearly formulated and communicated. They must be tangible, integrated into operations and tied to the general business objectives;
- The sustainability discourse must appeal to the personal values and principles of the employees. When people are told the benefits of sustainability for themselves, they will be more likely to embrace green practices (from energy saving at work to bicycle transport and printing on both sides of the paper);
- The achievements must be recognized. Positive reinforcement works better than blame because the employees will feel good about themselves and will be more likely to maintain the behavior;
- The approach must be a holistic one. Change does not happen overnight, but it takes time. Sustainability communication is a complex and constant process and can only be achieved in a sufficiently long-time horizon. The discourse must be multi-faceted and include several perspectives, each one reinforcing the last;
- The discourse must be consistent. The contents should be confirmed by facts and the sentences must be mutually supportive. Creating a visual identity (by logos, iconography, color palette, images) can substantially contribute to sustainability implementation;
- The content must be simple, the information must be relevant and easy to understand. It is useless to provide endless details and contextualization because those are most often skipped. It is appropriate to include a call to action;

- The communication process must constantly be evaluated and updated. It is important to measure the impact of the sustainability communication on the employees. The effort to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of the communication will help you to identify the problems and make adjustments;
- Sustainability implementation in a company requires patience and perseverance. Behavior change takes time.

3. Conclusions

An effective communication will have to defeat the resistance to change, which is the tendency of the system to perpetuate its current behavior despite efforts to change that behavior. Through persuasive communication appealing to scientific data on the impact of human activities on the environment, people can be convinced to get involved in supporting sustainable economic processes. Regardless of her/his role, of designer, manufacturer, service provider, client, user, etc., the individual is the engine of change as long as she/he embraces the philosophy of sustainability.

Internal communication is just a facet of the medal. It is not enough for employees to be convinced of the benefits of sustainable development and to participate in the company's efforts towards sustainable development. Sustainable achievements, strategies, processes and products need to be communicated externally, to partners, collaborators, customers, the media and the public in general (Cohn & Wolfe 2010). More and more people become aware of the importance of sustainable, "green" development. Without an effective campaign meant to make transparent the sustainability policies, a company could record significant economic losses, contracts, or customers because they do not understand the company's green efforts.

References

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