

Evolution of Corporate Sustainability Along the Sustainability Spectrum

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ABSTRACT

This study examines developmental models of corporate sustainability and society sustainable development to find that corporate models are narrow in scope, thus confining corporate action. A new model is proposed that considers a broader range of sustainability, consistent with societal sustainable development models.

INTRODUCTION

Developmental models define the stages through which corporations advance in their pursuit of sustainability. In parallel, similar developmental models define the stages through which societies advance in their pursuit of sustainable development. Given that corporations are embedded in societies, it is reasonable to expect that corporate and societal models of sustainability be compatible.

METHODS

Using each model's stage descriptions, this research positions both corporate sustainability models and societal sustainable development models along the sustainability spectrum.

RESULTS

Results reveal societal sustainable development models cover the entire sustainability spectrum from weak to strong but corporate models, by comparison, are framed around weak to intermediate sustainability (Table 1). Thus, organizations exemplified as leaders in sustainability are performing in the intermediate range, at best. Existing corporate models of sustainability do not encompass strong sustainability.

DISCUSSION

These findings suggest that developmental models of corporate sustainability do not encompass the full sustainability spectrum, which restricts corporations' frames of sustainability behavior. Therefore, a new developmental model of corporate sustainability is proposed that covers the full sustainability spectrum (Table 1).

- 1. Non-participatory** – a preadoption stage characterized by a reactive and defensive stance with no interest in corporate sustainability or responsibility.
- 2. Compliance** – defensive, externally enforced, a risk management maneuver.
- 3. Business-Centered** – a firm-centric proactive stance characterized by adoption & internal enforcement of sustainability initiatives for the business case (self-benefit, profit, image, reputation, employee recruitment & retention, public relations, competitiveness), engages one or more realms of sustainability, “do less bad”; continues business-as-usual with incremental improvements.
- 4. Integrative** - adopts an external perspective integrating all three realms of sustainability for the improvement of humanity & nature; “do more good”; continues advocating managerialist position and business solutions.
- 5. Restorative** – efforts to restore & repair damage of industrial consumerist economy.
- 6. Regenerative** – economic & societal realms co-evolve as part of nature, steady state, limited, or no growth, resilience, eco-ethics, circular material & energy flows, all processes mimic natural systems.

CONCLUSIONS

Corporations are embedded in societies and, as such, their models of sustainability should be compatible with societal models. Integrating both sets of models showed that corporate frames of sustainability behavior are narrow in scope while societal frames of sustainable development are much broader and extend the definition of sustainability.

The corporate model proposed here can enhance corporations' definition of sustainability. This broader definition can help corporations understand the scale of change necessary to achieve a sustainable society and help them move from weak to strong sustainability (Figure 1).

REFERENCES

Available upon request.

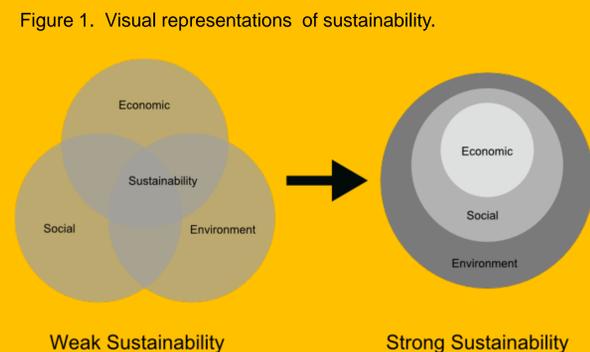


Table 1. Sages of corporate sustainability along the sustainability spectrum.

Sustainability Spectrum			Very Weak	Weak	Intermediate			Strong	Very strong	
Proposed Model		Non-participatory	Compliance		Business-Centered			Integrative	Restorative	Regenerative
Corporate Sustainability Models	Carlisle & Faulkner (2004)		Awareness	Promote Awareness	Initial Implementation	Mainstreaming				
	Zadek (2004)	Defensive	Compliance		Managerial	Strategic	Civil			
	Mirvis & Googins (2006)	Elementary		Engaged	Innovative	Integrated	Transformative			
	Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaon (2010)	Dismissing	Self-protecting & Compliance-seeking	Capability-seeking		Caring	Strategizing	Transforming		
	Visser (2010)	Defensive	Charitable	Promotional			Strategic		Systemic	
	Dunphy, Griffiths, & Benn (2003)	Rejection & Nonresponsiveness	Compliance		Efficiency		Strategic Proactivity	Sustaining Organization		
	Van Merrewijk & Werre (2003)	Pre-CS	Compliance		Profit	Caring	Synergistic		Holistic	
	Senge et al. (2008)	Noncompliance	Compliance		Beyond Compliance –		Integrated Strategy	Purpose/Mission		
	Nidumolu et al. (2009)		Compliance as opportunity		Value Chain efficiencies & sustainability	Design sustainable products & services	Develop new business models	Next practice platforms		
	Aggerholm & Trapp (2014)		First Generation		Second Generation			Third Generation		
Sustainable Development Models	Ainsbury & Grayson (2014)	Denier	Complier		Risk mitigator		Opportunity maximizer	Champion (or Leader)		
	Pearce & Turner (1990), Pearce (1993)		Cornucopian		Accommodation				Communalism	Deep Ecology
	Meyerson, G. & Rydin, Y. (1996)		Quasi-Cornucopian		Social Choice				New Economics	Limits to Growth
	Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien (2005)		Status Quo		Reform					Transformation

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