

[Home](#)

Dear Reader,

Much is talked these days about sustainability. A word that was hardly in the news only five years ago, has become almost a "must" word, and any conference or article that wants to demonstrate that it's keeping up with the current trends, has to include the S word. That is good, and a sign that we may be overcoming our environmental illiteracy. In this month's issue, I discuss the concept of a sustainability mindset.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

#### Quote of the Month

*"Democritus said, words are but the shadows of actions."*

Plutarch (A.D. 46?-A.D. c. 120)



Issue 124

 Send by email

 Share on Facebook

 Tweet it

December 2010

## The Sustainability Mindset

By Isabel Rimanoczy

It was back in 2005 that I read in the news about several CEOs who, as they retired, decided to engage in philanthropy. I asked myself: Why is it that they are interested in doing something for others only when they retire? What about while they are still in a position of leadership, and making daily decisions that impact communities and the planet at large? Soon after, I read how Howard Schulz, CEO of Starbucks, having gone through hardship as a kid, and with a working

mother with no health insurance, had decided to make health insurance a priority in his own business. He explained that Starbucks was asking their coffee providers in Africa to offer health coverage and education to the farmers, as a condition for selling coffee beans to Starbucks. That statement surprised me. Why would someone make it a prerequisite to improve the living conditions of people he may never meet? At that time, such a stance would have had no benefit to Starbucks' corporate image, since it was not something the coffee company was highlighting those days.

I decided to focus my doctoral research on this issue. I wanted to understand why certain business leaders engaged in and championed initiatives that had a positive impact on the community or the environment, without being asked to do so. Why were they doing it? What had inclined them to make that move? What information did they have that motivated them? Where did they find the driving impulse to go against "business as usual"? My personal purpose for doing this research was the hope that if we understood better what led them to this point of view, then educators and trainers could be more intentional and focused in preparing a new syllabus for developing the new generation of leaders that this planet seriously needed.

### **Sixteen leaders**

I identified a group of sixteen business leaders, who, my inquiries indicated, were exemplary role models. They worked in a cross section of industries: food, agribusiness, pharmaceutical, technology, retail, apparel, NGOs, household products, and the restaurant business. Their positions included CEO, founder, VP, Director, President, and their ages ranged from 75 to 37 years old, with a median age of fifty three. Thirteen of them were male and three female. They all, I ascertained, were championing initiatives that were not part of their formal role description; on their own initiative, they were making a positive difference by challenging the way their own corporation was operating. They were introducing sustainability principles, awareness and processes. They were pioneering a new way of doing business. Over the next few years I conducted in-depth interviews with this group, as I sought to understand what was at the core of their unusual behaviors. Finally, I was able to identify the key pieces through their stories.

### **The "OMG"<sup>[1]</sup> insight**

What became clear was, that at some point in their lives, these leaders came into possession of certain information that presented them with a dramatic picture of the "state of the planet". In some cases they learned through experts about the impact on the public's health of chemicals that some industries used in ignorance of their consequences; in some cases it was reading or listening to environmentalists talking about the pollution of soil, water, or air. But above all, it was learning about facts they had not been aware of, data that showed them how their own business was contributing to the planet's problems. Given our current extensive information about increased CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, about the problems of increasing demand for oil, natural resources depletion, endangered wildlife, water shortages, over-consumption and weather-related crises, it seems strange that we collectively were so ill-informed. However, we need to recall that a decade ago, and even less than that, few business people were sensitive to the impact of industry on the planet. At the time I started my research, in 2005, the concept of "sustainability" lacked a direct connection with the sustainability of the planet, and the people on it.

As they took in the new information something else happened to this group of leaders. They had a strong emotional response to the information—what I call the "OMG insight". We have to realize that none of these business leaders was intentionally making daily decisions to damage our planet:

but they were, simply put, 'environmentally illiterate'. Once they began to see the widespread and serious impact of mankind's accumulated decisions over the past fifty years, corporations and consumers together, they were shocked, distraught, horrified, and guilty. One interviewee went even further, telling me "I felt suicidal for the first time in my life".

So they determined to share the news with their colleagues, direct reports, and employees. Indeed, they needed to share the information with others; they felt that couldn't be the only ones to have it. And they went beyond merely presenting the information; they sought to do it in the form of making a "business case" that would connect with other business people. They demonstrated this by showing how the act of stopping the negative impact of undesirable practices could bring savings, increase competitiveness, or bring other types of advantages. I found this highly interesting, since this was not what had motivated them to act! For most of the leaders studied in my research, the inspiration and call to action came not from a rational business strategy geared to increase profit. It didn't come through a rational approach. It came through their hearts, which had been deeply touched by factual evidence of the planetary stress caused by human behaviors. However even to this day, sustainability consultants, conference keynote speakers, academics and publications focus on making the business case to prove the point, to justify a change in the way business is done.

### **More than rational information**

Information was certainly an important element in the leaders' changed perspective but, as I mention, it was the trigger that also led to an emotional response. The realization that industry had been contributing to the problems and "we are the captains of industry", as one person indicated, was a realization accompanied in many cases by guilt and pain.

There were other aspects of their reactions; there was a change in the way these individuals viewed the world. In what was a paradigm shift, they talked about considering the long-term as much as, or even more than, the short-term. They talked about finding that the traditional either/or choice no longer fit for them: they talked of an inclusive both/and perspective that didn't allow for easy answers. They made numerous references to how they developed an increasing sense of the interconnectedness of all things; they became more reflective. Several of the leaders in my study expressed how they developed an interest in "deeper questions", in asking about the purpose of life, the purpose of their own role, the contribution they were making to the world, etc. These new perspectives were not just an occasional "add on": they shaped and influenced how these leaders made decisions, set priorities, advocated for a new cause, and related to their employees and peers. It altered how they saw themselves, and by rethinking their role and purpose, in some cases brought themselves to a further change in their career or position. Something had changed; they had become, in effect, different persons. I termed this "the sustainability mindset".

### **We have two half brains**

Business is built on analysis, rational thinking, logic, anticipation, planning. In business, we value objectivity, tangible facts, proven evidence. These are features of our left brain hemisphere. We share a tacit code that rules out emotional responses, empathy, intuitive input, feeling-based judgments, and spiritual concerns. These latter are features of our right brain. According to the observations of my research, the business leaders who were originally very well-adapted and functioning "left brain managers", developed insights and behaviors that correspond to the right brain hemisphere. As a result they expanded their perspectives; they challenged much of their surroundings and their assumptions about how business should be conducted, assumptions under which they had naturally operated in their previous paradigm. As they did this they enriched their

worldview, they experienced a personal transformation that connected their work to their identity and their purpose in a new, different way. They became more holistic, more integral persons. This sounds like a wonderful, exceptional experience, and led me to wonder, don't we all have two half brains?

### What came after

As a result of my research and my findings about the sustainability mindset, I went back to my initial trigger question: Could we be more intentional when developing the next generation of sustainability minded leaders? My answer is yes, and it has already started to happen.<sup>[2]</sup> However it takes more than studying the profitable CSR enterprises, teaching students about facts and technical innovations and inspiring them with the "business case" of sustainability. That might be a good start, but it will only keep everyone thinking in an analytical way, with rational judgments on concrete facts. Nothing bad about that...but it leads me to ask, what are we saving the other half brain for?




---

<sup>[1]</sup> OMG: Oh My God

<sup>[2]</sup> I developed workshops for corporate leaders as well as a course for it that is being piloted at the Masters level.

 Send by email

 Share on Facebook

 Tweet it



LIM News is published by LIM LLC  
Editor: Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editing Support: Tony Pearson  
21205 Yacht Club Drive, Suite 708  
Aventura, FL 33180, USA  
Ph/Fax: +1 (305) 692-4586  
E-mail: [newsletter@LIMglobal.net](mailto:newsletter@LIMglobal.net)  
<http://www.LIMglobal.net>

ARL - Action Reflection Learning™ and Earning While Learning™ are registered trademarks, owned by LIM LLC.  
Copyright © 2010 LIM LLC. All rights reserved.